

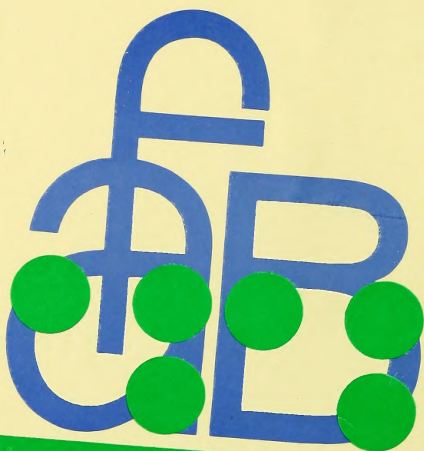
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Applause

Biography Of A Blind Performer

by
Mason Turner

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SPECIAL REVIEW COPY

by
Mason Turner

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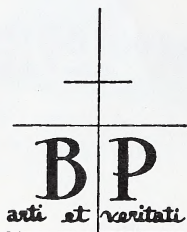
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Dedication

This book
is dedicated to those
handicapped persons who,
by sheer willpower and perseverance,
have attained goals
others thought were unattainable.

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To my wife, Janet, and her sister, Mildred Ketchur. It was the memories of their parents and the mementos they preserved that made this book possible.

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Mason Turner

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Chapter I

PRELUDE

Paul was born in Prussia on December 27, 1880. Christened Sylvester Joseph Meinert, he would later in life drop the name Sylvester in favor of Paul and often deplore both the place and date of his birth. He became an American citizen by virtue of his father's acquired citizenship in 1886, but always regretted not having been born an American citizen.

At an early age he discovered that being born two days following Christmas had a marked effect on the quantity and quality of his birthday gifts. "If only I could have been born eight months later", he often lamented, "I would have been born in America, and not plagued with the 'it's a combined Christmas and Birthday gift' routine that forever haunts me". Unspoken, but uppermost in his mind, however, was the possibility that he might have escaped the illness that so profoundly shaped his life.

For Joseph and Josephine Meinert, December 27, 1880 was a proud and exciting day — Sylvester was their first born son. Before the spring flowers bloomed, they planned to start a new life in America. Joseph talked incessantly of his plans for his shoemaker's shop and of the day it would be "Joseph Meinert and Son — Shoemakers".

Josephine's parents migrated to America in 1876 and settled in Lodi, New Jersey. For the past two years they had been urging their daughter to come to America. Josephine was anxious to join her parents. Joseph, who had been reluctant to leave his homeland, had finally succumbed to her pleading.

Now that he was blessed with a son, Joseph was anxious to go. The young men he had seen maimed and handicapped

during the Franco-Prussian war were still vivid in his mind. Proud as he was to have been a Prussian cavalry officer, he did not wish to chance his son being maimed. If he stayed in Prussia, Sylvester would have to fulfill his military obligations; and, wars were all too common. This was not for his son. Sylvester must be assured of all his faculties to enjoy and expand the business Joseph would build for him.

In mid-March of 1881, the family landed in New York. Josephine's parents, the Schultz's, met them at the boat where, for the first time, they saw their two grandchildren, Sylvester and Lena. Lena, age four, had never known the Schultzs for they had migrated to America two months prior to her birth.

As the Schultzs escorted them to Lodi, Mrs. Schultz excitedly described the flat she had found for them. It was on the first floor of the building next door to the Schultzs. It included a large open porch where the children could safely play; and, it was in a German speaking neighborhood.

Pleased that their housing accommodations were already resolved, Joseph's thoughts turned to his shoemaker's shop. He had brought all of his tools and was anxious to get established. Had his father-in-law found a source for leather and other materials he would need? Had he found a suitable location for the shop?

Assured there were several shop site possibilities and a source for his materials had been located, he began to talk of his plans, of the business he would build for Sylvester, and the day when his son would become a part of that business.

Joseph was a methodical man. By July of 1881, both his home and shop were set up; and, the family had settled down into a routine existence, interrupted only to the extent necessary to administer to the baby. Sylvester, now six months of age, had the measles.

When Josephine first discovered the rash, she called for her mother. Mrs. Schultz quickly recognized the symptoms and instructed her to, "Put him in the bedroom and pull down all the shades. Keep Sylvester in darkness and summon the doctor".

In due time the doctor arrived, and, as he entered the

bedroom, gruffly ordered, "Put up the shades. This room is as dismal as a dungeon".

"But doctor", Josephine cautioned, "we think Sylvester has the measles! Mother says it must be dark".

"Bah", he scoffed, "that is nothing but an old wives' tale". After completing his examination and confirming that it was measles, he added, "Light will not hurt him. It's a lovely day. Put him in his carriage out under that shade tree. Let him get some fresh air and relief from this ungodly heat".

Josephine complied with the doctor's instructions over the strong objections of her mother. Mrs. Schultz was upset and continued to insist that light was harmful and could weaken the baby's eyes. All traces of the measles were gone in a few days, but not Mrs. Schultz's concern for Sylvester's eyes.

A few weeks later, the local priest called upon the Meiners. As he came up the porch steps, he noticed the baby, awake in his carriage. Walking over to Sylvester, he picked up Lena's red ball from the porch floor and tried to entice Sylvester to reach for it. There was no reaction and the priest suddenly sensed that Sylvester was blind. After further experimentations confirmed his suspicions, he called Josephine out to the porch.

"Watch", he said. He waved the ball back and forth before the baby's eyes. "There is no reaction! I am not a doctor, but it's obvious, Sylvester is blind".

Shocked by the sudden revelation, Josephine screamed, "No, No; Oh, my God, No", grasped Sylvester and broke into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing.

Upon hearing the commotion, her mother rushed to her window and shouted, "Josephine, what is the matter?"

"Sylvester is blind!....blind!", Josephine screamed.

Mrs. Schultz blurted out, "Oh, my God!" and, as she dropped from sight of the window, there was a loud thud. The priest, assuming that she had fainted, rushed to her aid. By the time he reached her, she had died from a massive heart attack.

Finding himself confronted with two tragedies, the priest secured the aid of neighbors to summon a doctor and to

notify Joseph and his father-in-law, both of whom were at work. He then turned his attention to Josephine who was not yet aware of her mother's death. The priest broke the news as gently as he could but there was no way to blunt the shock or to ease the agony; nor was there any way to foresee its effect upon Josephine.

In time she adjusted to the loss of her mother and to Sylvester's blindness; but, initially she could not cope with these realities. The doctor advised that Sylvester's blindness was caused by the measles perforating both corneas. Whether or not this was the direct result of Sylvester's eyes having been exposed to bright light could not be confirmed. The doctor, if it was true, would not admit it.

Josephine believed she had killed her mother and blinded her son by not following her mother's instructions but could never openly discuss her guilt with anyone, not even Joseph. There were long periods of depression when foremost in her mind was the loss of her mother.

The awareness that Sylvester's blindness was the direct cause of her mother's death gradually enabled Josephine to unconsciously transfer her guilt to Sylvester, and, in doing so, built a barrier that time would not heal. She attended to all of his needs but never with warmth and affection.

Joseph was crushed by the realization that Sylvester could never lead a productive life, that all of his great plans for his son were ended. A blind man could not be a shoemaker, nor pursue any other respected craft. Sylvester was a casualty for life; and like the war casualties Joseph had known, he would have to be provided for.

Joseph's main and immediate problem was Josephine. He understood and accepted her initial grief and depression. When it did not wane after a reasonable period of mourning, he became concerned. Convinced that their home, situated as it was next door to her parents' home, fostered too many painful memories, he decided to move.

One thing was certain: they would still have to live in a German speaking neighborhood for they were not yet able to effectively converse in English. Lodi's German community was not large enough for them to move a sufficient distance

from their present home so Joseph moved his family to Newark, New Jersey.

He found suitable quarters for a shop in the German Hill section of Newark and also a flat within walking distance of the shop. In April of 1883 they moved. Shortly thereafter Josephine gave birth to Aggie; and a year later, to Stanley.

Sylvester, now nearing his third birthday, was a healthy, active child. The measles had not in any way visibly marred the appearance of his eyes. The perforations were too miniscule to be seen by the naked eye, but sufficient size to cause blindness. His left eye, which Sylvester in later years referred to as his good eye, could detect some light and shadows but the vision was far too blurred to recognize objects or people.

Josephine, now busy with her two infant children, had little or no time for the needs of Sylvester. It fell to Lena, seven years of age, to amuse her brother and to tend to most of his needs. Except on Sundays and holidays, Joseph worked long hours at the shop and the children seldom saw him. On those occasions when he had time to be with them, he praised Lena for "helping" Sylvester and encouraged her to take care of her little brother who "can't do for himself".

There was a strong bond developing between Lena and Sylvester that would strengthen and last a lifetime. Lena liked being with and helping her brother; and she enjoyed teaching him to do things for himself. Sylvester was quick and anxious to learn. He was already beginning to resent his father's readiness to assume that he was completely helpless and wanted to prove to his father that he was able to do things without the help of others.

By his willingness to believe Sylvester totally incapable of doing for himself, Joseph had unwittingly awakened two traits in Sylvester, independence and determination, traits that would later surface and dominate Sylvester's life. It was Lena's patience and encouragement, however, that nurtured these traits.

Since he first learned to walk, Sylvester was dependent upon others to guide him around the house. Often he became

impatient when waiting for someone to assist him and tried to move about without aid. When he did, he inevitably stumbled over furniture and angrily vented his frustration by striking out at the object that caused him to stumble.

Lena was the only one in the family close enough to Sylvester to recognize and understand his compulsion to be self-reliant. Perhaps, she thought, this need could be satisfied if he could be taught to move about the house by himself. If he could mentally picture a room and the relative positions of the furnishings in that room, she was convinced that he would be able to move about that room without too much difficulty.

To confirm her thinking, Lena shut her eyes and tried to move freely around the parlor. Even with a vivid picture of the room freshly imprinted in her mind, she found herself groping for recognizable objects because, with her eyes shut, she could not sense direction or distance.

After considerable trial and error, Lena developed a mental picture of the parlor that encompassed direction and distance. To do this, she first had to pace off and memorize the distances between various room furnishings. Secondly, she had to visualize the floor of the parlor as the face of a clock and to fix the locations of the various furnishings by their relative positions on the face of that clock.

Joseph had previously purchased a wooden toy clock designed to teach children to tell time. The hours were etched into the face of the clock and the wooden hands were movable. Joseph had patiently used the toy clock to teach the children to tell time. Initially he had ignored Sylvester because of his handicap; but, Sylvester kept insisting until he was given a chance to participate in what, to the children, was a game.

Once given the opportunity, Sylvester quickly learned to identify the numbers on the clock by feeling the numbers etched in the wood, and, to tell time by feeling the position of the hands in relation to those numbers. Lena, impressed with the speed and ease with which he had accomplished this, was convinced he could be taught to visualize a room.

She selected the room that would be easiest for Sylvester to

visualize, the bedroom he shared with Stanley. There were only seven objects to be memorized, the entrance door, a closet, a window, a bed, two chairs, and a dresser. It was an oblong room off the kitchen. The entrance door was an equal distance from the sidewalls. Opposite the entrance door at the far wall was a bed, and, on each side of the bed was a chair. The dresser was against the left wall immediately to the left of the entrance door and the window was farther down the wall opposite the foot of the bed. The closet door was on the right wall directly opposite the dresser.

Lena suggested to Sylvester that they play a new game, called the clock game. She explained that it was a two part game involving his bedroom. The first part was to learn what objects were in the room and where each object was. Later on, when they played the second part of the game, Lena would name one of the objects in the room and he would have to find and touch it. Sylvester was eager to begin.

Taking his hand, Lena led him to the entrance door and had him face into the room. "You are now standing in the doorway facing into your room", she explained. "Stretch your hands sideways as far as you can. See, now you're touching both sides of the doorway", she further explained as she gently guided his hands to the door frame.

"Imagine that you're standing on the face of your toy clock", she continued, "and you are standing right on top of six o'clock. Now, take my hand and we'll slowly walk right up the clock to twelve o'clock". As they approached the foot of the bed, she extended his hand forward to touch the bed, saying, "Now here is the foot of your bed. Hold on to it and, all by yourself, feel your way around to the side of the bed and then along the side up to the other end of your bed".

Sylvester proudly felt his way around and up to the head of the bed. As he neared the chair at the right of the bed, Lena instructed him to stop, adding, "That was good! Now we know the door is at six o'clock and your bed is at twelve o'clock. There is something next to your bed. Reach forward and see if you can tell me what it is?"

Sylvester groped for the chair and, upon finding and feel-

ing it for size and shape, elatedly announced, "It's a chair!"

"You are right", Lena responded, "now we know your bed is at twelve o'clock and that the chair is at one o'clock. There is another chair at eleven o'clock. Can you feel your way around the bed to find it?"

"I think so", he replied as he excitedly began to work his way around the bed. When he reached the chair and touched it, he shouted, "I found it, Lena! Look, I found it!"

"Good, now we know what is at eleven o'clock, twelve, and one o'clock. Give me your hand and we'll walk back to six o'clock and then find out what else is in this room".

When they arrived at the doorway, Lena faced him into the room". You are now at six o'clock and straight in front of you is twelve o'clock," she advised. "Take one step forward. Good! Now turn to your left, take another big step forward and then stretch your left hand out from your side and see if you can touch the wall".

Sylvester, gamely following the instructions, gropingly found the wall and, as he kept tapping it with the palm of his hand, he called out, "Here it is!"

"You're doing fine, Sylvester. Now, keep your hand on the wall and slowly walk forward until I tell you to stop". Lena waited until he was just in front of the dresser, ordered him to stop, and said, "There is something directly in front of you. Reach out and tell me what it is".

Sylvester felt the dresser but could not determine what it was. "That's a dresser", she explained. "It's a large chest containing five drawers in which mother stores Stanley's and your clothes. It is at eight o'clock. Now there is something at ten o'clock that we must find." Taking his hand, she guided him around the dresser to the wall and instructed him to feel his way along the wall until he found a window at ten o'clock.

"Now we're getting to know this room, Sylvester. We've found a dresser at eight o'clock and a window at ten o'clock". She added, "Let's continue on and see if we can find that eleven o'clock chair. After that we'll continue around the clock to four o'clock and find the last thing, the closet door".

After he found and felt the closet door, Lena had Sylvester

feel his way along the walls until he reached the entrance door. She then began to question where the various objects were located on the clock. Whenever there was any hesitation, Lena made sure that his mind oriented itself on two objects, the door at six o'clock and the bed at twelve.

Sylvester quickly memorized the seven objects and their respective locations. For the next few days, the game consisted of reciting the name and location of the seven objects; and then, all by himself with the walls for a guide, walking clockwise around the room announcing the name of each object as he approached it.

Sylvester was now ready for part two of the game, but before he could walk directly to any object he had to develop a comprehension of distance. Concentrating on one object at a time, Lena taught Sylvester to count off and memorize the number of steps he took from the entrance door to a specific object. First it was to the bed, followed by the dresser, the window, and the closet. When this was fixed in his mind and he was able to move directly from the door to any of these objects, the foot of the bed was used as a base and he memorized the number of steps required to reach either of the chairs, and to the window, the dresser, the entrance door and the closet.

Part two of the game was painstakingly slow at first but Sylvester doggedly persisted and, in time, became quite adept at moving about the room. On returning from school one day, Lena was excited and pleased when she discovered Sylvester, oblivious of anyone's presence, moving freely about his room touching and naming the various objects. It was obvious from his comments that he was practicing to impress his father.

That evening, as soon as Joseph got home, Lena arranged a demonstration for his benefit. With Joseph watching, Lena named object after object and Sylvester walked directly to the object as she named them. Joseph, who had been unaware of their game was amazed and delighted with what he saw. He excitedly hugged Sylvester and then Lena and it was impossible to discern who was the proudest, Sylvester or Lena.

Encouraged by Sylvester's ability and her father's praise, Lena decided to expand the game, room by room, as long as Sylvester was capable of memorizing them. Wisely, she selected the order of the rooms based on the number and location of the objects in the room, choosing first the room with a limited number of objects all of which were close to the walls. The most difficult rooms, the kitchen and the dining room, were kept until last.

Sylvester, anxious for more of his father's praise, was eager to expand the game and demonstrated an incredible faculty for absorbing and retaining the information Lena imparted to him. In less than a year he had sufficient awareness of each room to move about the house with relative ease. In the learning process, however, there had been many collisions with furniture and outbursts of anger, but periodic praise from his father sustained him.

As his awareness developed, so did his confidence and a peculiar strut that was to become a lifetime trait. He moved somewhat like a toy soldier, his legs moving forward with his knees held stiff, his chest out, and his arms swinging slightly forwards and backwards, suggesting "I don't need anyone's help".

Lena was like a little old lady who had suddenly been rejuvenated. Since she was five there had been little or no time for herself because most of the responsibility for Sylvester had been thrust upon her by her mother. Aggie and Stanley were now old enough to play with Sylvester, and Sylvester no longer needed her to guide him around the house. Suddenly, she found herself with free time and she relished it.

Lena still had to dress and undress Sylvester and to watch over him when he played outside. If she could teach him to move in the house, certainly, she reasoned, she could teach him to dress and undress himself if she laid out the clothes for him. And why couldn't she teach him to go in and out of the house by himself and to move about the front and back of their home without assistance?

Sylvester's "I can do it" attitude was her ally. He learned to dress himself and to move freely about outside the house.

By the time Sylvester was ready for school, in September 1888, Lena had instilled in him a conviction that, although painfully tested at times, would endure for a lifetime — the conviction that he could do whatever he set his mind to do.

Chapter II

Bittersweet Years

Josephine, anxious to get Sylvester out from under foot, suggested that he be sent to school in September of 1887. In December he would be seven years old and should be in school.

"The boy is helpless! What can school do for him?" Joseph argued.

"They know how to help him. Let him go", she pleaded.

"No! He can't see to learn and if he can't see how is he going to get around? Lena can't sit in class with him".

Josephine knew that there was too much of the Prussian officer in Joseph; once he made a decision he expected it to be accepted without questioning. She nevertheless persisted, and Sylvester overheard one of their discussions.

Sylvester's instant excitement at the prospects of going to school was just as quickly crushed when he heard his father angrily reply, "No! I told you no! Can't you get it through your head the boy is helpless!"

"Please, Poppa," Sylvester cried out, "I can do it. Let me go to school, Poppa, please let me go".

The anger quickly dissipated as a sudden feeling of remorse and pity overwhelmed Joseph. He grasped Sylvester in his arms and tried to console him. "No, son", he said gently as he hugged Sylvester, "you are different from other children. School is not for you. I want you to stay at home and play with Stanley and Aggie".

Bitter and hurt by his father's remarks, Sylvester wanted to cry and strike out at something; but, he couldn't. That overwhelming urge to impress his father would not allow it. His only consolation was his faith in himself; he was still

convinced that he was no different than other children. If they could go to school, so could he.

During the ensuing year Sylvester remained at home. Aggie and Stanley were old enough to be his playmates; and, shortly after his bitter disappointment at not being able to go to school, Lena proposed the clock game. These activities helped to keep Sylvester preoccupied. School was no longer foremost in his mind, but the hurt still surfaced occasionally.

Early one morning in the spring of 1888, Joseph summoned all the children to the parlor and instructed them to remain there until he returned. "Enjoy yourselves, but do it quietly. I do not want to hear a lot of noise!". By the tone of his voice it was obvious that Joseph expected quiet and they managed, with occasional prompting from Lena, to quietly amuse themselves.

A considerable period of time had elapsed before Sylvester shattered the quiet with, "There is a baby in the house! I heard a baby cry". They all listened intently but only Sylvester's hearing was acute enough to detect a faint cry in the distance. The others dismissed the idea, suggesting Sylvester was imagining things. A short time later, however, Joseph entered the room carrying a tiny infant in his arms. "Children," he announced, "you have a new sister. Her name is Catherine; for short, we'll call her Kate".

Josephine, still set on sending Sylvester to school, found in Kate the justification she needed. Tending to infant Kate was too time consuming. She had, she reasoned, little time for the other children; and, what time she did have was needed for little Stanley and Aggie. Thanks to the clock game, Sylvester was now demonstrating the ability to get around several of the rooms with remarkably little difficulty. This provided Josephine with the additional arguments she needed. If Sylvester could get around the house by himself, he could do so in a classroom. His ability to memorize and retain mental pictures of rooms proved he was a very bright boy. He should have the opportunity to learn as much as he can.

Josephine cunningly connived her plan to pressure Joseph to send Sylvester to school in September. Knowing if

she forced an immediate decision it would be a negative, irrevocable decision, Josephine planned a summer campaign. She would complain of exhaustion, too much to do, not enough time for the children, and cite any little incident that could demonstrate how the needs of Sylvester were imposing on her time. She would also take every opportunity to point out how bright Sylvester really was and how sad it was to see that remarkable little mind deprived of the knowledge school could provide.

As her summer campaign progressed Josephine artfully enlisted the aid of Lena and Sylvester by discussing school with Lena. These discussions, never in the presence of Joseph but always when Sylvester was in hearing distance, were structured by Josephine to instill in Sylvester a burning desire for school; a desire so great that it would compel him to persistently pester Joseph for permission to go. It was also intended to impress Lena with the importance of school for Sylvester, to prompt her to suggest she could escort Sylvester to and from school, and to subtly encourage her to pressure her father to send Sylvester to school.

By late summer her campaign was successfully operating. Sylvester was stubbornly pressuring his father to send him to school and Lena was pleading his case. Lena would take him to and from his classroom. In time she would teach him to move about the school, just as she had taught him to move about the house. There was a lot he could learn at school and he had proven how well he can learn.

Josephine bided her time while Joseph patiently, but unsuccessfully, tried to convince the children that Sylvester could not cope with school. Then, when convinced that the children had gotten to him and sensing that his determination was faltering, Josephine began the attack with her big gun, her health. All this agitation was too much for her nerves; she was exhausted; she couldn't take any more of it. Let the boy go to school. Joseph owed it to Sylvester to give him a chance; and, Joseph owed her some peace and quiet, a chance for her nerves to recuperate. Startled by Josephine's outburst and concerned that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Joseph capitulated.

The school authorities were reluctant to enroll Sylvester because of his handicap. Josephine, knowing they could not refuse him admittance, insisted; and, Sylvester, who would be eight years of age on December 27, was assigned to the first grade at the Belmont Avenue School.

The school was only a few blocks from the Meinert's residence, but the blocks he had to traverse were unfamiliar to him. For the most part they were commercial streets lined with small shops and businesses and alive with unusual scents and sounds that aroused his curiosity. He was intrigued by the pungent odor of printer's ink, the fragrance of fresh-cut lumber, the incredible smell of the fish market, and a wonderful array of aromas emanating from the bakery, the fruit stand, the grocery, and the flower shop.

His inquisitive nature was excited by the sounds that bombarded him from all directions. There was the constant beat of horses' hoofs, the creaking of the wagons, and the unending noise of their steel-rimmed wheels over the cobblestones, providing background for all those other incredible sounds, the crack of the drayman's whip, the sounds of the cabinetmaker's tools, the resounding thuds of heavy crates being loaded or unloaded, unfamiliar voices and footsteps passing by, venders hawking their wares, and a myriad of other sounds to incite one's curiosity.

To Lena fell the task of interpreter, the translating of the smell or a sound into the object or the activity that created it. It was not long before Sylvester recognized various places by their smell or sound and proudly identified each of them for Lena as they passed by it. There were buildings along the route, however, that could not be recognized by a sound or a smell and these gaps between recognizable buildings annoyed Sylvester. He had to know what was there.

Lena sensed the motivation for Sylvester's need for this information. Sylvester was trying to acquire a mental picture of the entire school route. He could move about the house; and now he was attempting to acquire the knowledge that would allow him to go to school by himself. Lena, anxious to encourage his urge for independence, repeatedly described the route as they traversed it, until it was fixed in

Sylvester's mind.

Worried that Sylvester might suddenly attempt to assert his independence by going off to school by himself, Lena cautioned him, "You know, Sylvester, one day you'll be able to go to school by yourself but you must learn how to do it. It is a lot harder than going around our home; it is dangerous. You could be run over by a horse and wagon, or knocked down by people who do not know that you can't see them".

"Oh, I can do it", Sylvester confidently assured her.

"It is not that easy, Sylvester. You will have to learn to listen, to make sure nothing is coming before you cross a street. You will have to listen for what's in front of you as you walk along the sidewalk. It will not be easy".

"I can do it, Lena. I'll learn", Sylvester assured her.

"Good! From now on", Lena suggested, "let's not hold hands any more. Try to walk along by yourself. I will be right beside you to stop you if you are in danger of getting hurt".

Withdrawing his hand from hers, Sylvester confidently started to stride down the sidewalk. He had taken less than a dozen steps when Lena grasped his arm. "Stop", she cautioned, "didn't you hear the footsteps in front of you? You must listen for footsteps in front of you. When you are not sure if they are directly in front of you, stop. Wait until you hear the steps pass by you. If you stop, people will walk around you. If you keep walking, you may collide with someone who thinks you are going to walk around him."

Sylvester willingly followed the instructions. His progress at first was painstakingly slow, making it necessary to limit the experiment to homeward bound trips after school. Slowly but steadily, however, his audio perception began to develop. In time he acquired a keen sense of awareness of people moving about him by the sound and direction of their footsteps.

Heretofore, the light and shadows detected by his left eye had been meaningless to Sylvester. Suddenly they now had meaning. As footsteps in front of him came closer, his left eye detected a shadow. When the footsteps passed by him, the shadow was gone. When a person was walking imme-

diately in front of him there was a shadow; and, the shadow gradually disappeared as the footsteps in front of him faded into the distance. The shadows were nothing more than blurred, unrecognizable images of people or objects; but, to Sylvester, they were welcome lighthouses, warning him of the dangers around him. For the first time he experienced the sense of sight. As limited as it was, he effectively used it to supplement his audio perception.

By the end of the school year Sylvester was able to travel to and from school by himself. He made only one concession to his pride; he asked for assistance when crossing heavily congested streets. Whenever there were sounds of heavy traffic, Sylvester stood at the corner waiting for footsteps to approach from his rear. When he heard the steps he turned in the direction of the footsteps and asked, "Will you please help me cross the street?"

Sylvester's fascination with the streets he traveled never waned; but his enthusiasm for school was eroded by the increasing amounts of time when he was forced to sit aimlessly by while his classmates were silently reading or writing. In the beginning, school was exciting. Most of the activity was oral and Sylvester enjoyed participating. His quickness in absorbing and retaining that which he heard enabled him to respond quicker and more accurately than most of his classmates, and this bulwarked his false confidence. It proved that his father had been wrong.

In the 1890s the curriculums were very basic. The first year consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, and drawing. In the succeeding years, geography, history, and English were added. Arithmetic gave Sylvester his first surge of confidence. The clock game had familiarized him with the very numbers his classmates were struggling to learn. Even though he could not see to identify the numbers on the blackboard, there was great satisfaction in knowing he knew the numbers.

Because most of the early instructions in addition, subtraction and multiplication tables were verbally given, Sylvester could easily participate and was quick to volunteer the answers. As time went on and the class worked on prob-

lems recorded on cards or on the blackboard, the teacher made it a practice to read the problems aloud for Sylvester's benefit. In time, however, the class was required to record the problems on their slates. Rather than hurt his feelings, the teacher issued a slate to Sylvester, knowing it was of no use to him. It was then, for the first time, Sylvester truly sensed his inability to participate; and, his frustrations with school began to fester. Prior to that there had been other indications, but he had brushed them aside. He could not see to recognize the various letters of the alphabet. It hurt not to participate when the teacher asked the class to identify each letter as it was pointed out; but, it was unimportant.

Drawing was silly; the early stages of reading, dumb. He listened as his classmates read aloud from their primers such phrases as "John saw the cat," "Mary ran down the hill", and, "The farmer has a cow". It did not tell any real story. It was just a bunch of junk. Later, however, when his classmates' reading skills had developed and interesting stories were being read aloud, Sylvester's frustrations began to magnify. He so wanted to read aloud with the rest of the class; but, even more so, he wanted to read for himself those interesting stories.

In time he was so discouraged and angry that he wanted to quit school, but his stubbornness would not allow it. He could not even admit his feelings to Lena; and, never would he ever admit to his father that he could not cope with school. Instead he stayed on through the third grade, becoming increasingly bitter and more and more disruptive. He would hum or sing just loud enough to annoy those around him, tap rhythms on the desk with his fingers, make nerve-tingling noises by scraping chalk over his slate, or inject sarcastic juvenile comments such as, "That's dumb".

His teachers, not having the time nor the skill to cope with sightless students, had been content to let him sit at his desk and absorb whatever knowledge he could. As he became more and more disruptive, however, their attitude of indifference changed to that of disciplinarian. Finally, when Sylvester found himself with almost daily detention after class was let out, he curbed his classroom antics.

One hour per day detention, the maximum allowed by school regulations, gave Sylvester far too little time to meander the streets that intrigued him so much. The urge to be on those streets quelled his rebellious classroom behavior. However, the intense anger and frustration fomented by the knowledge that he could not learn like others and his unwillingness to admit this to his family would not subside. The streets were his safety valves — places where the excitement of sounds and smells, and two special people, temporarily made him forget all the heartaches of school.

Although commercial in nature the streets were neighborhood streets. Shops and other businesses occupied street level floors of most buildings, and the upper floors housed families. Most of the merchants and shopkeepers lived above their shops and seldom journeyed far from home. Their street was for the most part their whole world. They knew all of their neighbors, at least by sight, most people who regularly passed their shops, and all the neighborhood gossip.

The manner in which Lena escorted Sylvester to school aroused neighborhood curiosity and it was not long before the whole neighborhood knew that he was blind. As time passed and he strove to walk independently, they watched Sylvester's progress with interest. Some merchants began to greet him as he passed by. Among the first to do this were the printer, Mr. Bulshevitch, and the cabinetmaker, Mr. Stanyeski.

Sylvester was a very friendly boy. Greetings from merchants elicited a cheery response and a curiosity to know more about the people who greeted him. Now, completely disgruntled with school, he tried to erase it from his mind by satisfying his curiosity about all who spoke to him.

Many merchants did not have the time to answer the never ending array of questions about themselves and their shops; but Messrs. Bulshevitch and Stanyeski did. They were intrigued not only by the unending barrage of logical questions about their shops and the tools and materials they used, but more so by Sylvester's ability to retain that which they told him.

The shops of these two men were adjacent to each other, and they were close friends. One day Sylvester overheard them talking in their native tongue. It was not English and he knew it wasn't German. He understood and spoke German; it had been spoken in his house and neighborhood ever since he could remember. This was different and it fascinated him. When told it was Polish, the language of Poland, Sylvester immediately wanted to know what and where Poland was. When told, he expressed a desire to learn the language. The two men were flattered and agreed to teach him.

For the next two years Sylvester spent as much time as was possible at the printing shop learning to speak the language. A close bond gradually developed between Sylvester and his mentors, and for the first time Sylvester found someone with whom he could honestly discuss his school frustrations. Sylvester readily talked about his home life, his brother and sisters, and his father, but hardly ever mentioned his mother. From the conversations it was easy to recognize Sylvester's desire to please his father and to convince him that he was not the helpless boy that his father made him out to be.

It soon became obvious to the two men that something had to be done rather quickly before the trauma of school and the indifference of the parents completely destroyed Sylvester's ambition and confidence. Convinced that there had to be some organization to aid persons like Sylvester, the two men began to make inquiries about educational assistance for the blind. Upon hearing of a Newark girl attending a special school for the blind in New York City, Messrs. Bulshevitch and Stanyeski sought out the girl's parents and requested information about the school.

The school, located at 33rd Street and 9th Avenue, was the New York Institute for the Blind. It was a boarding school supported by grants from the states of New York and New Jersey. Surprisingly, under the provisions of these grants, parents of the students could not be charged for the students' board and tuition.

Armed with all the information they had gathered, Mr.

Bulshevitch and Mr. Stanyeski called upon Joseph Meinert to persuade him to enroll Sylvester in the Institute. At first a bit dubious, Joseph, in deference to Josephine's wishes, made application for Sylvester's enrollment, and Sylvester was accepted for the September 1891 semester.

Sylvester was stunned and hurt by the news. He could conceive of no difference in one school from another. His family no longer loved him; they were getting rid of him. He begged and cried, but to no avail. Joseph grew angry with his carrying on and harshly berated him for his lack of appreciation for that which was being done for him. Even the gentle and patient persuasion of Messrs. Bulshevitch and Stanyeski was of no use. Sylvester felt betrayed by those he dearly loved and admired.

Chapter III

Formative Years

Sylvester's resentment of the Institute, spawned by fear of the unknown, intensified throughout the summer. It was nurtured by the realization that he would be separated from his brother, sisters, home, and the streets he had come to know and love. He hated public school and could not conceive of any school being different from that to which he had been exposed. All attempts to convince him that he would like the Institute, that it was a special school for blind persons, were to no avail. The thought that he was being sent away from home weighed too heavily on his mind to allow any favorable thoughts concerning the Institute.

By September however Sylvester was resigned to the fact that he was going to the Institute. Throughout the whole summer his father had been adamant. Mr. Bulshevitch and Mr. Stanyeski were still convinced it was right; and now even Lena thought he should go. His demeanor masked the rancor that churned within him. He had no choice. He was going, but he was going with a mighty big chip on his shoulder.

Upon arrival at the Institute, however, he was a very subdued, lonely little boy. Saddened by tearful goodbyes, bewildered by his new surroundings and frightened by the taskmaster tone of the headmaster's voice, Sylvester meekly followed instructions.

Sylvester had unknowingly crossed the threshold into an exciting new life that would be filled with music, friendships, and countless good times. This, however, was not evident to him nor would it be until he neared the end of his formal education at the Institute, seven years later.

First impressions of the Institute were not too favorable. The long hours of classroom activities, the severe regimentation and the strict discipline, all tended to support Sylvester's preconceived ideas of the Institute and to sustain his resentment. Further fomenting this was the fact that he and his peers were referred to not as students but as inmates of the Institute.

In the 1890s "Inmate" was a common and proper term for identifying someone who was part of a community occupying a single dwelling. There was nothing derogatory about the title, but many people had narrowed their interpretation of the word to limit it to occupants of institutions such as prisons, asylums, and poorhouses. Many of the students resented being called inmates and childishly believed the Institute was in fact a prison.

Their rigid schedule tended to support their belief. Students attended classes five and a half days a week. Saturday afternoons and evenings and all day Sunday except for chapel were free. Otherwise, they adhered to a schedule that would have modern students rebelling. They were up, had breakfast and attended chapel by 8:00 am. Ten minutes later classes started and continued until 5:00 pm with only four breaks, a ten and a fifteen minute recess in the morning, one hour starting at 12:45 pm for their main meal of the day, and a fifteen minute afternoon recess. Supper was from 6:00 pm to 6:30 pm. Otherwise the time between 5:00 pm and 8:30 pm was divided into half-hour periods during which the students were occupied in reading, general studies, piano or guitar practice, or harmony lessons. The only free time during the entire day was from 8:30 pm until lights out at 10:00 pm.

Sylvester was but one of 243 students attending the Institute in 1891. Except for the fact that they were sightless, the students were no different from any other group of students. They were a mix of leaders and followers, conformists and nonconformists, the meek and the mischievous; and strict discipline was used to enforce adherence to the Institute's rules of behavior. Any infraction of the rules, as Sylvester soon found out, resulted in the issuance of a demerit. An

accumulation of demerits could evoke various types of punishment such as being confined to one's room on weekends, special chores, or whatever else the headmaster deemed appropriate. Any faculty member could issue a demerit for an infraction of a rule by recording the details of the infraction in a large ledger maintained for that purpose.

The endless hours each day devoted to the education of the students was as trying on the faculty as it was on the students. Although often short on patience and quick to discipline, the faculty was a very dedicated group. They could foresee the results of their efforts and were intent on imparting the knowledge and developing the skills that would enable Sylvester and his peers to earn a living, to be self-reliant.

The boys were taught the art of piano tuning, cane seating, and mattress making. Girls were taught sewing and knitting by hand and by machine, embroidery, crocheting, weaving, cord lace, cooking and household economy. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the Institute was not a trade school. The academic and music courses which were given equal prominence enabled several of Sylvester's peers to go on to become teachers, lawyers, or musicians.

Progressing chronologically from the subprimary through the senior grade, the following subjects comprised the academic course:

Reading, Spelling, Numbers, Arithmetic, Geography, English History, Object Lessons, American History, New York Point Writing, Grammar, Typewriting, Physiology, Rhetoric, Composition, Algebra, Geometry, Logic, Natural Philosophy, Mental and Moral Philosophy, Science of Government, and Political Economy.

The music department concentrated first on vocal activities involving control of breath, the formulation and articulation of tones, exercises for the cultivation of the ear, and part singing. Later on, piano, organ and guitar lessons were initiated, followed by instructions on harmony, harmony notation, counterpoint, musical form, musical history, theory, and the practice of teaching piano technique.

During the first two years Sylvester and his classmates concentrated on reading, spelling, arithmetic, singing, and daily physical fitness exercises. Sylvester discovered that he could actively participate in all phases of classroom activities, and school took on a new meaning. Gradually and grudgingly, he began to recognize that the Institute was special and that he enjoyed his classes and the fellowship of his classmates. Each visit home for the holidays or summer vacation however rekindled his desire to remain at home and a temporary resurgence of his resentment of the Institute.

When his resentment flared Sylvester became troublesome. He would be disruptive in class, impertinent to faculty members, and unruly in the corridors and on the stairwells. His behavior by today's standards was mild, but in the 1890s such behavior was not tolerated. Sylvester drew demerits for talking back to his superiors, stamping his feet as he walked up the stairs, humming in class, and other infractions of the rules. References to him in the Demerit Ledger included "arrogant" and "incorrigible". Upon discovering that nobody at the Institute understood Polish he delighted in making side remarks in Polish, knowing that it annoyed his superiors. He was often reprimanded but seldom punished because no one knew for sure that he was saying anything improper.

As Sylvester became more and more engrossed in classroom activities his tantrums diminished. As he slowly blended into the lifestyle of the Institute the resentment vanished and the defiance was gone. Sylvester had finally made peace with the Institute. He enjoyed the singing classes. He loved to sing. It was pure recreation, a break from the rigor of the school day. Spelling and arithmetic were not new to him. He had had some exposure to them at public school, but the way it was taught at the Institute made it more meaningful. It was the reading classes, however, that intrigued him and helped to dispel his resentment.

Long before he came to the Institute he could recite the alphabet. Now for the first time he was learning to recognize the letters by their feel. The upper and the lower case of each

letter had its own special configuration of raised dots contained within an area approximately $1/8'' \times 1/8''$. There were additional configurations for the ten digits, various punctuation marks, syllables, diphthongs, triphthongs, and digraphs.

These dots were little nipples that protruded from the surface of a heavy stock of waxed paperboard. The students had to memorize each of the configurations and learn to read and identify each configuration by touching it. An immeasurable amount of time and patience were required to accomplish this. Learning to read was even more difficult. Sighted people recognize printed words, but this option was not available to Sylvester and his classmates. Each letter had to be recognized and retained until the last letter of the word was read. Then and only then could the letters be recognized as a word.

The system of writing was known as the New York Point System. When the Institute was founded in 1831 it taught the Braille System. Mr. William Bell, who became superintendent of the Institute in 1863, invented the New York Point System and installed it at the Institute because Braille, still in its early stages of development, did not fulfill the Institute's needs. By the time Sylvester entered the Institute it had a very extensive library converted to New York Point and continued to expand throughout the years he was there. Several decades later the Institute changed back to Braille, but Sylvester continued to rely on New York Point.

For the entire seven years at the Institute Sylvester's roommate was Theodore Schrader. Many times their mischief tempted the headmaster to split them up, but he always relented. There was a strong bond between the two boys. Sylvester, the self-reliant one, was always ready to guide Theodore, who was somewhat timid about walking alone. It was quite apparent to the faculty that Sylvester was the leader and Theodore just tagged along. Sylvester, therefore, was always assumed to be the instigator of their mischief when in fact it was more often Theodore who concocted the schemes that earned demerits.

Theodore innocently instigated the mischief that came

close to abruptly ending Sylvester's education at the Institute. Shortly before lights out the boys were sitting around their room, trying to impress each other. It was one of those, "I can hold my breath longer" and "I can whistle longer without stopping" sessions. Sylvester had outlasted Theodore whistling and Theodore was searching his mind for another challenge. The dormitory fire horn! Ah! — there was the challenge. Sylvester could not blow that horn, and even if he could he could not prove it. He would not dare blow it.

The fire horn, which rested in a niche at one end of the dormitory hallway, had a mouthpiece similar to a bugle's. It was the building's fire alarm signal and was blown by the headmaster periodically to initiate fire drills.

Theodore's challenge, "Betcha can't blow the fire horn", was followed by some rapid fire, "Yes, I can" and "No, you can't" retorts. Finally, Theodore came forth with what he thought would win him the argument. "Oh yeah! Then let me hear you blow it!"

Sylvester, by now bursting with self-assurance, thought not of the consequences, only of proving his horn-blowing capability. "Let's go", chirped Sylvester, "but we have to be careful not to get caught". They slipped out of their room and tiptoed down the corridor. When they reached the horn they stood quietly, listening for any telltale footsteps or voices. Satisfied that no one was in the corridor Sylvester reached for the horn and put it to his lips. Unfortunately, his horn-blowing capability was far better than he realized. When he put the horn to his lips and blew, the sound came out loud and long and resounded throughout the dormitory. The students, having participated in many fire drills, reacted promptly. The building was evacuated without incident, and the students remained outside for a long period while a bewildered headmaster and his staff checked the building.

No one had observed the boys with the fire horn, and the deed would have gone undetected except for the boyish need for recognition. The next day the whole incident was a good joke to the students and there was much speculation on who blew the horn. The boys could not resist taking credit. They proudly related their deed to some of their classmates and

exalted in their brief moment of glory. It was a very brief moment for word quickly reached Mr. Babcock, the headmaster, and he angrily summoned the boys to his office. It did not take long for Mr. Babcock to elicit the truth. Sylvester was the chief culprit; he blew the horn. Mr. Babcock had tolerated a lot of mischief by the students and, particularly, Sylvester. This however was the last straw. "Sylvester, you are expelled", he said sternly, "I am sending you home immediately".

Frightened by what his father might do, Sylvester groped for a way out. "But, Sir, I can't go home; I don't have my trunk. It's at home in Newark."

"Put your duds in a paper bag, my boy," Mr. Babcock responded, "but go home".

The headmaster then turned back to Theodore and began to question him to determine the extent of his involvement. As Theodore explained, Mr. Babcock realized that Sylvester had not deliberately blown the horn to sound a fake fire alarm. He had assumed it was a premeditated nefarious act. When he realized that it was nothing more than a thoughtless, boyish antic, he deemed expulsion too harsh a punishment. Sylvester was allowed to stay, but both he and Theodore were confined to their room for the next two weekends.

Most of the pranks were not of serious nature. On many Sundays when the snow was on the ground the boys accumulated piles of snowballs and waited to ambush Mr. Babcock as he walked to church. They heard that he wore a high silk hat and relished the idea of hitting it. They would wait along the path he walked, listen for his footsteps, and then fire their snowballs in the direction of the footsteps. The odds of their hitting the hat were infinitesimal but so, also, were the odds that Mr. Babcock ever knew of their ambushes for he too was blind.

Many of their antics were of a self-inflicting nature. One hot night the boys yearned for a glass of lemonade. The only way to get lemonade at that hour was to raid the kitchen which was off-limits to students. Undaunted, they sneaked into the kitchen and searched around for lemons. None could be found; but persistence, luck, and a good sense of smell

enabled them to find a bottle of lemon extract. A mixture of water, sugar and extract was concocted, taken to their room and consumed with great satisfaction.

Later that night the boys were woefully sick, and their moans awakened their peers. The headmaster and the nurse were summoned, and they tried to ascertain what had been served that caused only two of all the students to have such severe stomach cramps. A major decision faced the boys. They could admit raiding the kitchen and face the wrath of the headmaster or they could suffer in silence. Both chose to suffer.

One Sunday afternoon they headed to the ice cream store with their allowance money burning a hole in their pockets. Not content with a cone they asked the price of a box of ice cream. When they discovered that they had sufficient money to each buy a quart and a pint, there was no hesitation. Anybody could eat a quart and a pint. What started out to be a delightful feast turned into an endurance contest with each determined to prove he could finish all of his ice cream. Once again, the headmaster was confronted with two pain-stricken boys reluctant to admit to their folly. It did not take him long to determine what they had devoured, but they never revealed the full extent of their gluttony.

In later years Theodore and Sylvester often laughingly recalled the many incidents that kept their names prominently displayed in the Demerit Ledger. From the third year on, they explained, the curriculums became increasingly more difficult and time consuming. One had to cram what fun one could into what little free time there was.

The third and fourth years were particularly trying. After two years of concentrating on reading, spelling and arithmetic, new courses were added — English and American History, Object Lessons, Geography and Writing. Sylvester particularly enjoyed geography. It was for him a game. Dissected maps were used as a teaching tool. These could best be described as geographic jigsaw puzzles. There were embossed and relief maps in flat and global forms which gave the students general impressions of large areas such as states or countries. These maps were not, however, accurate

as to details.

The flat map consisted of individual pieces in the shape of each state and territory as it existed within the continental United States at that time. Each contained one or more distinctive nailheads to identify the location of the Capitol and the major cities within its boundaries. The globe map was constructed so that segments of the globe such as continents could be lifted out and replaced.

Students were called to the front of the class and handed a section of the map. A student was expected to identify a state, country, or continent by feeling the shape and then take it to the correct map and reinsert it into its proper place. It was difficult to differentiate between Colorado and Wyoming or between North and South Dakota. Tennessee could easily be identified; and anyone called to the head of the class to identify Florida was quickly labeled teacher's pet.

In later years when Sylvester returned to the Institute for class reunions he often took his daughter, Janet, to the classroom where the dissected maps were kept. He loved to impress her with his ability to identify the states. It got to be quite a game. Initially, she picked the more easily identified states, but when she realized how quickly he identified them she tried hard to stump him but seldom did.

Geography may have seemed like a game but learning to write was a long and laborious undertaking. They had to learn to create on waxed paperboard the various configurations of dots that they had earlier learned to read and recognize.

Writing tools consisted of a specially constructed wooden board, two brass plates, a stylus, and waxed paperboard. The brass plates were used as a guide to enable the students to create series of raised dots in a precise, uniform manner. The paperboard was placed between the two plates and held in place by the wooden board. The upper plate, used as a guide, had three rows each containing fifty-two squares approximately $1/8''$ X $1/8''$ in size. The lower plate had three grooves. When the two plates were positioned on the board the grooves of the lower plate were directly beneath the squares on the upper plate.

The stylus was similar in shape and style to an awl except it had a blunted tip to prevent perforating the paperboard. To create the nipples or raised dots, the students pressed the tip of the stylus into the paperboard, using the holes in the upper brass plate as a guide. The grooves in the bottom plate allowed just enough room for the stylus to stretch the paperboard down to form the nipple.

The physical writing of the signs was a meticulous and tedious task. Moreover, it was mind boggling. To write students had to completely reverse their reading-thought process. They read from left to right, but they had to write from right to left. They also had to reverse the position of dots for each configuration.

To create the raised dots students had to write on the backside of the paper and then turn the paper over to read the dots. Dots placed on the right side when the paper was turned over appeared on the left side. The numeral "3," for example, is a configuration of three dots in a square, one each in the upper and lower right-hand corners of the square and a third dot in the lower left-hand corner. To write the number and have the raised dots properly positioned, the dots must be placed one each in the upper and lower left-hand corners of the square and the third one in the lower right-hand corner.

A sign painter has the same problem when painting a message on the inside of a store window that is to be read by persons on the street. What he does is to duplicate exactly what he sees in a mirror after writing the message and holding it up to the mirror.

The work was difficult and students enthusiastically welcomed the brief interludes afforded by the holidays. Sylvester was no exception. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter were happy times for he was again back home for short but always enjoyable visits. With each visit home Sylvester and Stanley grew closer and closer. Stanley looked up to his older brother and was impressed by the fact that he went away to school. Sylvester found in Stanley a companion and a guide. Together they explored more and more of German Hill, with Sylvester questioning and Stanley describing their sur-

roundings, as Lena once did.

Together they worked out their own special communication system, a little two-part tune that could be whistled. Whenever Sylvester was sent out to find Stanley he walked about whistling the first part of the tune, pausing for a few moments, then whistling it again. This continued until Stanley heard Sylvester and responded with the second part of the tune. Their musical radar system became the normal method of calling to each other and carried over into their adult years. Stanley never knocked on Sylvester's door or rang his bell; he just stood on the porch and whistled until Sylvester responded. When he telephoned he never announced himself or asked for anybody; he just whistled.

One of Stanley's chores was to walk along the railroad tracks and pick up any coal that had spilled off coal cars or tenders. When Sylvester was home he accompanied Stanley and pulled the wagon. Later, not content with pulling the wagon, he enlisted Stanley's aid in proving to his father that he could pick up coal. Sylvester discovered coal had a special smooth texture different from that of the rocks and stones found along the railroad tracks. Whenever Stanley found a big spill he showed Sylvester where it was and together they picked it up. Sylvester felt for lumps that had that special smooth texture and loaded all that he found.

On trips home, no matter how short, Sylvester always found time to visit Mr. Bulshevitch and Mr. Stanyeski. These gentlemen were greatly interested in his progress and constantly encouraged him to take advantage of all the opportunities that the Institute had to offer. They also continued to help him expand his ability to converse in Polish. In many ways they were far more fatherly to him than his natural father.

Sylvester's loss of sight had been a crushing blow to Joseph. It wiped out all his hopes and plans for his son and left Joseph with the gnawing conviction that his son would never be able to provide for himself. He could never bring himself to encourage Sylvester's attempts to be self-reliant, believing it built up false hopes. It was not that Joseph did not love his son, for he did, and displayed it in materialistic

ways.

Joseph continuously searched for medical solutions for Sylvester's problem. Money was never a consideration. Whenever he heard of a doctor who might restore his son's sight he arranged to have that doctor examine Sylvester. On eight separate occasions, while Sylvester was a young boy, this resulted in Sylvester being subjected to eye operations. Many were painful and none was successful.

Joseph made toys for Sylvester. The shoes that he made for him were so soft and beautifully crafted that they were the talk of the students at the Institute. Each fall when Sylvester returned to the Institute his classmates asked to feel and examine his father's creations. Joseph gave freely of his talents and his resources but never what Sylvester craved, moral support and encouragement.

It was Mr. Bulshevitch and Mr. Stanyeski who gave him the support and encouragement he needed. Throughout much of Sylvester's early life these two men were very instrumental in shaping his destiny. Nothing else that they did however matched in importance their effort to find and to have him placed in the New York Institute for the Blind.

Aptitude tests which were a part of the Institute's procedures revealed that Sylvester had the faculty of perfect or absolute pitch. Through experience, the Institute knew that this often indicated a musical mind and the power to become a good piano tuner, a performer, or a musician. They were aware, however, that some of those who possess this particular power were sadly deficient in almost every other particular of musical aptitude. When tests revealed that Sylvester possessed this power and further tests confirmed his musical aptitude, he was given every opportunity to develop his talents and took full advantage of it. Over the next few years he became proficient in playing the piano, organ and guitar, skilled in piano tuning, and an excellent singer.

Sylvester became obsessed with all forms of musical expressions. The Institute which he so vehemently resented became his musical mecca. Not only did he have an organ, piano and guitar available for his use, the Institute had teachers of all forms of musical expression ready and willing to assist serious students.

Summer vacations suddenly seemed less attractive for there was no piano, organ or guitar available at home. Once again it was Mr. Stanyeski and Mr. Bulshevitch who solved his problem. The Stanyeskis had a piano and Mrs. Stanyeski was willing to allow Sylvester to use it during the day. There was no guitar available, but Mr. Bulshevitch had an old violin at home that nobody used. It had four strings and was not that different from a guitar. Perhaps, he suggested, Sylvester would like to experiment with it.

That summer vacation for Sylvester was the most enjoyable of all he had experienced. Between being with his family and friends, spending long hours at the piano and experimenting with the violin, the summer passed all too quickly. By September he was playing simple tunes on the violin; and, Mr. Bulshevitch, pleased with what Sylvester had accomplished, gave him the violin as a going back to school gift.

The violin was the first of nine musical instruments that Sylvester would one day master without formal training. Violin lessons were not part of the Institute's curriculum, but staff members helped and encouraged him. It was their explanation of stringed instruments — the similarity in keyboards but difference in playing techniques — that enabled him to experiment with other stringed instruments and with instruments not unlike the piano, such as the xylophone and the accordion.

The Institute, which dealt in realities, encouraged Sylvester to develop all of his musical talents but continued to stress the importance of piano tuning. Sylvester had proven to be very adept at tuning. This was a skill that could assure him a livelihood, whereas the probability of earning a living with his other musical talents was chancey.

Until Mr. Stanyeski had an occasion to visit Sylvester at the Institute, Sylvester foresaw himself as a piano tuner. Not only had the Institute stressed tuning as a career, his father was enthusiastic about it. Joseph for the first time was seeing his son as a productive person. On that visit Mr. Stanyeski took Sylvester to Tony Pastors and in doing so opened up a whole new world to Sylvester — vaudeville. He

was enthralled with all he heard, particularly the singers, the musical acts, and the orchestra that supported the acts. Equally thrilling was the sound of the audience's applause.

Life took on new meaning and time passed quickly as he perfected his skills. He became more and more proficient on the violin, guitar, piano and the organ. During summer vacations he often substituted for the organist at his family's church. Sylvester welcomed each opportunity to play the church organ and bask in the limelight following the service. For Stanley however it meant hard work. The organ, a pump organ, had to be pumped by hand. There were always practice sessions before each occasion and for these practice sessions it was Stanley who was assigned the task of pumping the organ. Sylvester got the glory; Stanley got the blisters.

When Sylvester was graduated from the Institute in June of 1898 his confidence knew no bounds. He was an entertainer — a good entertainer. Now at seventeen and a half years of age he was suddenly free of years of discipline and regimentation and eager to conquer the world. The little rambunctious boy who entered the Institute in 1891 was now a cocky, self-assured young man.

Chapter IV

The Struggle

Sylvester returned home bursting with confidence in his ability as an entertainer and relishing the thought that he was finally emancipated. He was free to come and go as he chose — to do as he pleased. Nobody could have any doubt about his plans for he constantly talked about the entertainment world and how he would become a part of it. His father shared none of his enthusiasm. Joseph, who believed hard work and a good trade to be the keys to success, had no respect for show people. To him they were nonproductive, seemingly unsavory characters who lived far too well. He could not conceive of their honestly coming by the money they needed to live the way they did.

When Sylvester was still at the Institute Joseph had paid little or no attention to his comments about entertaining. Sylvester was being trained to be a piano tuner. It was a respectable trade and one in which a blind person could succeed. There had never been any doubt in his mind that Sylvester would be a piano tuner. When for the first time Joseph realized that Sylvester was serious about being an entertainer he was irate, "Have you lost your senses? You are a piano tuner!"

"No, I am not, I am an entertainer".

"You are a fool!" Joseph shouted, "we have already found a few customers for you. As long as you live in my house you'll tune pianos!"

Sylvester quickly realized he could not win the battle. "All right, Poppa, I'll tune pianos during the day but at night I'm going to entertain".

"We'll see", Joseph snapped as he turned to leave the

room.

Sylvester quickly discovered that the city of Newark had not been eagerly awaiting another piano tuner or another professional entertainer. That summer he picked up occasional piano tuning jobs which kept him in pocket money, but no one was willing to hire an unknown entertainer. Undaunted, Sylvester and his violin sought out audiences who would listen. Wherever there was a piano available for the playing he would go. The political clubs, ethnic associations, local saloons, and the homes of friends and acquaintances, all became his entertainment halls. He was welcomed everywhere for his price was right...an invitation, an audience, but no fee.

Through the help of friends and satisfied customers the piano tuning clientele expanded and Sylvester's income improved sufficiently to satisfy Joseph that his son was getting established. Joseph was far from happy with Sylvester's nightly cavorting and the late hours he kept. Only the fact that Sylvester's business was expanding and Sylvester was never late for a tuning appointment kept Joseph from putting a curfew on Sylvester's activities.

Once again, it was his sister Lena who came to his defense. A few years previously she had married Joe Jablonski. Together they operated a combination saloon and boarding house that featured a large hall suitable for weddings, banquets, or dances. Sylvester was a frequent visitor for there were two pianos — one in the saloon and one in the hall — which gave him the chance to practice or to entertain. Lena watched his progress as time passed and convinced that he showed promise urged her father to be patient with him.

It was Lena who in 1899 got him his first professional booking. It was not uncommon for groups renting the hall to ask Lena or her husband for help in arranging for professional entertainment. When she felt Sylvester was qualified she recommended him. It was the first of many performances that Sylvester gave in their hall before Prohibition forced them out of the business.

By 1900 Sylvester was being hired, for a small stipend, to

entertain at private homes and occasionally at public affairs. He sang, played the violin, or entertained at the piano. It was a beginning. Newark was becoming aware that Sylvester Meinert was an entertainer. Moreover, there were some in Newark who now accepted him as a professional entertainer.

All the money Sylvester earned was free and clear. Joseph, anxious for his son to get established, did not require him to pay for his room and board. Joseph assumed, however, that Sylvester was saving his money and Sylvester did until he accumulated enough money to get a guitar. When Joseph found out that Sylvester had squandered his money on a guitar he burst into a tirade. He berated Sylvester for being a spendthrift, an idiot obsessed with being an entertainer, an irresponsible fool carousing his life away. "You'll put an end to this immediately," Joseph concluded, "or you'll get out of my house!"

Throughout the tirade Sylvester had unsuccessfully tried to interject arguments in his own defense. Finally, he realized that the only way to placate his father was to let him think he was getting his own way. He promised to change his ways, to save money, and to slow down on his nighttime activities.

He did save his money and for the next few weeks sharply curtailed his nightly activities. Sylvester however hungered for the applause of audiences. Gradually he slipped back into his old ways. Again he was out nightly. When he did not have a booking he was entertaining gratis at one of his hangouts, be it a saloon, social club, or a gathering of friends.

Sylvester managed to keep his promise to save. He slipped only once. He did purchase a harmonica, but that did not take too much of his savings. Joseph would have never been aware of it if Sylvester had refrained from playing it at home for the enjoyment of his younger sisters. Unfortunately, Joseph did, and at precisely the same time he became aware of what he called the "dastardly act" that Sylvester and some of his friends perpetrated on a saloon keeper called Jake the Barber.

Sylvester and his pals often dropped in at Jakes for beer and the free lunch. Jake had a hairlip and the speech impediment that so often accompanies a hairlip. When the boys had just about had their fill, the teasing started with one purpose in mind — get Jake mad. Poor Jake's speech impediment became more and more pronounced as he got madder and Jake was an individual who never hesitated to say what was on his mind.

On this occasion the teasing went beyond Jake's tolerance level and he summarily ordered them out of his saloon, with instructions never to return. This happened a few days before Jake's birthday. On the morning of his birthday a deliveryman entered Jake's saloon and presented him with a lovely clock and a birthday card signed by all of the boys. Jake was shaken by their thoughtfulness. Full of remorse for his earlier treatment of the boys he determined to make amends.

That night the boys all showed up at the saloon loudly wishing Jake a happy birthday. Jake was pleased, so pleased that everything that night was "on the house" for the boys. There was no teasing and everybody had a good time. When the boys finally left, Jake's farewell included, "Drop in again. Any time!" The boys never did return for obvious reasons. At the end of the following week a bill collector entered the saloon and announced that he was there to collect the weekly payment on the clock. Jake assured the man that there was a misunderstanding. He explained how the boys had purchased the clock and presented it to him as a birthday gift. When the collector finally convinced him that the boys had in fact made a very small down payment, stating that Jake had agreed to make the weekly payments, Jake lost his temper. He picked up the clock, stormed out the front door, and hurled the clock in the street. The boys had assumed that Jake would refuse to pay and the collector would take back the clock. When Jake heaved it, it broke and Jake had to pay for it.

Joseph saw nothing amusing about the incident. It was dishonest, disrespectful, and disgusting. To Sylvester it was nothing more than a funny prank made even more amusing

by Jake's unexpected behavior. He laughed each time he tried to explain it to his father, and each time he laughed Joseph became more infuriated. Finally, his anger no longer controllable, Joseph began to rant. Again he berated Sylvester for the people he associated with, the life he was leading, his unwillingness to act responsibly, and his defiance. Sylvester bristled, "Defiance? What defiance?"

"Did you not buy a harmonica after I told you to save your money!"

"Come on," Sylvester shouted, "I earned that money and I can do with it what I want!"

"When you're in my house," Joseph sternly replied, "you'll do as I say."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Sylvester snapped back sarcastically, "are you going to hold that over my head for the rest of my life?"

With that, Joseph picked up Sylvester's violin case, went to the front door and hurled the case down the stairwell. "Now, you get out too," he shouted, "and stay out. I don't want you or any of your damn instruments in this house again."

Sylvester was stunned by his father's outburst. He had nowhere to go, but pride would not allow him to stay. Without a word he strode to the door and worked his way down the stairwell, groping for his violin case. After finding it he left the house and walked aimlessly down the street, not knowing what to do. Finally he went to the home of a young friend, told her what had happened and asked if he might stay there for a few hours while he figured out what to do. When her parents — Mr. and Mrs. Pieta, heard of his plight, they graciously provided him with temporary shelter.

The next day while his father was at work he returned home and removed all of his possessions — the guitar and harmonica, tuning tools and supplies, clothes, and his savings. He was deeply concerned about his immediate future. He knew that he could not impose upon the Pietos for too long, even though while there he insisted on paying for his room and board. His violin, which was broken when his father threw the case down the stairwell, had to be repaired.

All this would quickly exhaust his meager savings. He needed steady income, and piano tuning and bookings were too sporadic to assure a steady income.

Sylvester went to Mr. Stanyeski and Mr. Bulshevitch and told them what had transpired. He spoke of his need for a steady income and asked for suggestions on how he should go about finding a job to provide that income. The men did not know of any available jobs suitable for Sylvester. They promised to inquire around and suggested that he do the same. "Ask all your friends," Mr. Bulshevitch advised, "ask wherever you go to entertain or tune pianos. Who knows? Something may turn up."

"We've not been very helpful, Sylvester," Mr. Stanyeski added, "but bring me your violin. Perhaps I can mend it". Sylvester lost no time in picking up his violin and bringing it back for Mr. Stanyeski's inspection.

After examining it Mr. Stanyeski advised, "Yes, it can be mended. Leave it with me. I'll fix it."

A few weeks later Mr. Stanyeski gave back the repaired violin but would not accept any remuneration for what had been done. Originally Sylvester believed that Mr. Stanyeski repaired it. In later life however he often suspected that his friends had it repaired by a violinmaker because after the repairs the tone of the violin was improved.

Sylvester made the rounds of all the places he frequented — saloons, clubs, and social gatherings — telling all of his need for a steady job. It became common gossip in the saloons that his father threw him out of the house and he was blind.

Doctor Baxter happened to be in the saloon one evening when Sylvester was at the piano entertaining a group of friends. Upon hearing the gossip the doctor became curious about Sylvester's talents. When advised that they included the ability to play the violin, guitar and harmonica, the doctor suggested that he could solve all of Sylvester's problems. He could provide him with steady employment doing what he obviously enjoyed doing — entertaining.

Baxter had just recently adopted the title Doctor to enhance a new venture he was about to undertake — a tra-

veling medicine show. Medicine shows were the traveling drugstores of the day, selling one or two cure-all remedies for almost everything. They flourished in an era when people were far more gullible and when communication between towns was slow and limited. There were some reputable purveyors of medicine amidst the medicine shows, but many shows were operated by rogues or con men.

The show consisted of one or more horse-drawn wagons, a pitchman, one or more entertainers, and possibly a living testimonial to the miraculous cure-all powers of the elixir being sold. Baxter was just starting out. His was a one wagon operation. He could get along without the living testimonial, but he desperately needed an entertainer to attract the crowds around the wagon. He wanted someone who would work cheap, and Sylvester was obviously "his pigeon". Sylvester needed a job desperately and being blind there was little chance of his quitting once they were on the road.

Baxter had all the qualifications of a medicine show pitchman. He was dignified in appearance, spoke in a manner that induced respect, had an excellent command of the English language, and he had no scruples. Sylvester was no match for this master of cunning and he succumbed quickly to the wiles of his soon-to-be employer.

Baxter went over to Sylvester, introduced himself, and after being overly complimentary of his musical talents requested Sylvester join him for a drink. He wanted to know all about Sylvester, where he studied, what were his plans and what was he doing at present...all skillfully connived to lead Sylvester into divulging his present predicament. Baxter was ready to pounce when Sylvester mentioned his need for a steady job. "Providence has brought us together!", he said, with all the reverence of a preacher, "I need an outstanding entertainer and you need steady employment. God is with us tonight!"

He then began to talk of his plans. He told Sylvester about the miraculous medicine he had discovered and how his love for his fellowman impelled him to take this medicine to all peoples. He talked of his impending trip westward, the

excitement of the adventure and the opportunities to visit new places and meet new people. He explained how they would travel and live in the wagon, the importance of the entertainer, and the opportunity to make money.

"You'll have no room and board to worry about. You'll sleep in the wagon and I'll provide the food," Baxter added. "It is dangerous to carry too much money on the highways. Before leaving each town I plan to have the local bank transfer whatever excess cash we have to my bank here in Newark."

Sylvester was duly impressed. "Gee, that's smart thinking".

"I'm glad you think so," Baxter replied, "because you should do the same. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you two dollars pocket money each week, and when we get back to Newark ten percent of the profits. You'll have a tidy nestegg when we get back."

"Great!", Sylvester responded, "When do we start?"

"In a few weeks — once I'm sure the snows are over — probably April 15."

Sylvester took with him only the clothes he needed, his violin, guitar and harmonica. The balance of his possessions was stored at Lena's house. For the next six months the medicine show moved slowly westward as Doctor Baxter unloaded his magic elixir on a gullible public. The elixir was a mixture of water, whiskey, and any available syrup that would color and sweeten the concoction. It never harmed nor cured anybody, but when taken in sufficiently large enough doses it could make one temporarily forget his ailments. Supplies were no problem. Baxter brought along an ample supply of paper labels. Bottles were available in the larger sized towns and the ingredients could be picked up in any town. Whenever the elixir supply ran low Baxter made up another batch.

The medicine wagon had a portable stage. When they came into a town, Baxter selected a site where hopefully they could attract the attention of the bulk of the local citizenry. The stage was set up at the rear of the wagon. Sylvester started the free entertainment and continued until a suffi-

cient sized crowd had gathered. Then Doctor Baxter took over and cajoled and wheedled the citizenry into buying his elixir. Periodically, after the crowd dispersed, the routine was repeated. When Baxter felt there was no longer a sufficient market for the product they packed up and moved on to the next town.

Baxter's powers of persuasion were sufficient to keep a naive Sylvester believing that the elixir was a cure-all. He was so enthralled by the plaudits of the crowds that he thought only of entertaining and ways to enhance his performances. Originally he sang, accompanying himself on the guitar, or played the violin. Later on he added the harmonica and experimented with monologues and playing the violin while holding it in very odd positions such as between his legs, by the side of his hip, over his head, and behind his back. His trick violin playing was clumsy at first, but the crowds loved it and he persisted. In time he perfected it to such a degree that in later years it was a featured segment in all of his vaudeville acts.

Sylvester served his vaudeville apprenticeship with the medicine show. He learned how to respond to an audience and how to make an audience respond to him. It was not always easy. The crowds were quick to express their pleasure or displeasure and never hesitated to call out their favorite tunes. If Sylvester did not know a particular tune, he asked for someone to sing or hum the tune a few times, after which he usually could pick up the melody and play it well enough on the violin or harmonica to satisfy his listeners.

Sylvester soon learned that ethnic groups all responded enthusiastically to their own music. Because such groups tended to concentrate in towns or neighborhoods of their own, Sylvester often found himself entertaining crowds which were predominantly German, Polish, Italian or Irish. He was quick to identify them by their dialects and to respond with the music they loved, including songs sung in their own language. Sylvester, who loved classical music, often injected a classical number to test the crowd's reaction, and if it was favorable he continued with more classical numbers.

In the evenings or at other times when Baxter was away from the wagon, Sylvester had to stay by the wagon to discourage pilferage. Generally he sat on the wagon seat or propped himself up against a wheel and played one of his instruments. Quite often it was purposely done to get the local citizens to come over and strike up a conversation. Sylvester had an insatiable curiosity. He wanted to know all about the people, their town, and their ethnic background. Being particularly interested in ethnic music and languages, he took every opportunity not only to learn more of their music but also some of their language. He was forever asking how to say in their languages words or simple phrases that he could use in future conversations.

Sylvester's interest in languages never abated. In addition to English, German and Polish, all of which he spoke fluently, during his lifetime he learned to understand and speak Italian, Hungarian, Yiddish, and Slavonic well enough to get his message across. He memorized the words to numerous ethnic songs but would never sing in a language until he was assured by people who spoke the language that his pronunciation was phonetically perfect. When you entertain an audience with their own songs he believed you owed it to that audience to be phonetically perfect. Anything else, in his opinion, was insulting to the audience.

Six months passed quickly for Sylvester. The treks between towns were often long and monotonous, the weather occasionally inclement, and the wagon damp and uncomfortable. A river or a pond was his only bathtub, and he was alone at night whenever Baxter treated himself to the luxury of a hotel bed. None of this was sufficient to discourage Sylvester. There were always audiences somewhere ahead and he was by now addicted to their applause.

It was now mid-October. Baxter talked of heading south to a warmer climate. When they were close to Canton, Ohio, Baxter told Sylvester they had to go into Canton to have the horse shod and the wagon repaired before making the long journey south. The repairs would take a day or two. They couldn't use the wagon while it was being repaired, so they

would share a hotel room. When they drove up to the hotel Baxter instructed Sylvester to bring in all of his possessions. "It is not safe to leave them in the wagon while it is being repaired."

Fortunately for Sylvester the hotel proprietor knew or sensed that Baxter could not be trusted. When Baxter asked for two nights accommodations the proprietor insisted on full payment in advance. Baxter feigned great indignation; but when it failed, he reluctantly acceded to the proprietor's demand.

After leading Sylvester to their room Baxter went out supposedly to arrange for the wagon repairs and the shoeing of the horse. When he returned he explained that it would probably take two days for the repairs. He would know more tomorrow when he checked with the blacksmith. Baxter, who had not removed his possessions from the wagon, had only one intention — sell the horse and wagon and leave town on the next train. The sale could not be consummated until the next day, so Baxter checked his belongings at the railroad station and returned to the hotel with the two-day repair story.

The next morning Baxter left the hotel supposedly to check on the repairs. Instead he picked up the money from the sale of the horse and wagon and headed for the station. Shortly before his train pulled out he arranged for a messenger to deliver to the hotel a note that he had previously prepared for Sylvester. When the hotel proprietor handed Sylvester the message, Sylvester explained he was sightless and asked him to read the message. The proprietor opened the envelope and read the following:

October 16, 1900

My Dear Sylvester:

It is with great sorrow that I have to tell you of a sudden death in my family that has made it necessary for me to rush home immediately.

Regrettably, our venture was not profitable. I found

myself without sufficient money and was forced to sell the horse and wagon in order to get home quickly.

Equally regrettable, because our venture was not a success, there were no monies to forward to my Newark bank and therefore no profits for us to share in.

All is not lost however for we have shared a great adventure and you have enriched yourself in ways far more meaningful than temporary monetarial remuneration.

Your Friend and Companion,

Dr. Thaddeus Baxter

It was immediately obvious to the proprietor that Sylvester had been duped. What shocked him even more however was the fact that Sylvester was not aware that he had been duped. Sylvester's only reaction to the note was one of concern and sorrow for his friend, Dr. Baxter. The proprietor was tempted to tell him the truth but decided it might be better not to add to his problems.

"Where do you come from?", he asked.

"Newark, New Jersey".

"Do you have the means to get back home?"

"If you mean the carfare to get home, no!", Sylvester responded, "but if you mean a way to get the money to get home, yes."

"How is that?"

"I've only got a few dollars in my pocket, so I'll need room and board. I am an entertainer — a good entertainer," Sylvester explained, "I should be able to find a saloon keeper willing to have me entertain in his saloon for board and a place to sleep, plus whatever tips I get. Do you know of anyone who might be interested?"

"No, not off hand. You're paid up for another night here," the proprietor advised. "I can give you the names of some saloon keepers and you can check with them. Meanwhile I'll ask around."

"Great! Just give me their names and tell me how to find their places. I'll give it a try."

Armed with his violin, guitar and harmonica, Sylvester went forth to make a deal. Knowing that all good saloons had pianos, he asked to be shown to the piano and let it be known that he had an extensive repertoire. If requested to play a specific number he did so. He managed however to work in some ethnic numbers whenever he suspected from the saloon keeper's name or dialect that such numbers would appeal to him.

After three attempts Sylvester succeeded. If Fritz Meuller's voice did not give him away his name did, and Sylvester took full advantage of it. He appealed to Fritz's German musical preferences, sang in German, and summed up the audition by explaining in German that it was his intention to work his way back to Newark. When he accumulated sufficient tips he would move on to a city closer to Newark, make a similar arrangement and remain there until he had sufficient funds to move on once again.

Fritz had an available back room. His free lunch counter always had more food on it than his customers consumed. It would cost little or nothing to provide Sylvester with room and board. In return he would have an entertainer who to get the tips he needed would have to work hard to please the customers. It was a good deal for Fritz and Sylvester. Sylvester started that evening and moved in the next day.

This was the first of many such arrangements that ultimately resulted in his return to Newark. Sylvester had learned how to please the crowds when he was with the medicine show and he used what he had learned to increase the size and frequency of the customers' tips. He could not ask for tips — he had to cater to the customers' preferences and depend upon their showing their appreciation monetarily.

The saloon was his stage, practice hall, and social club. He seldom went elsewhere. Mornings he practiced and experimented with the instruments. Evenings and whenever there was sufficient clientele in the afternoons, he entertained. During his breaks he mingled with the customers, forever asking questions about themselves, events, and the cities to the east along the rail line to Newark. How much was the rail

fare to the city? What were the names and locations of the better saloons in the city? Did they have entertainment?

When Sylvester had accumulated sufficient money to cover the fare to the next city plus a week's lodging, he told Fritz of his plans to move eastward and asked for a letter of recommendation. Fritz willingly obliged, and that letter facilitated his making a similar deal in the next city. From then on each time he was ready to move eastward he asked and received another letter of recommendation. With each additional letter the task of making a similar deal in a new city or town became easier and easier.

Sylvester made seven such deals in the fifteen months it took to work his way back to Newark. No two saloons had the identical type of clientele. In each saloon he had to cater to slightly different musical tastes and he enjoyed doing it. It was excellent training for the young apprentice but he never conceived of it as training. It was fun, so much fun that the fifteen months passed quickly. He would have lingered longer at the last place but Christmas was near, and his only regret in the past twenty-one months was not being home for Christmas last year.

Sylvester returned to Newark in December of 1901. Lena was excited to see him and insisted that he live with them. He was anxious to stay there but only as a boarder. Lena was reluctant to accept rent from her brother. She agreed only because she knew his pride and stubbornness would not allow him to stay if he could not pay his own way.

Unfortunately, he returned home at a very inappropriate time. One of the severest smallpox epidemics in Newark's history occurred in the winter of 1901-1902. The mortality rate was high and the population panicky. It was such a highly contagious disease and so rampant that the safety of the city made it necessary to totally isolate all of its victims. A cholera pesthouse was maintained at the edge of the salt meadows, and the law mandated that all victims be sent to the pesthouse.

During the holidays Sylvester made a social call on a young couple whom he had not seen since joining the medicine show. At first they seemed very reluctant to open their

door, but when they realized it was Sylvester they were overjoyed to see him. They were very cordial, so much so that Sylvester sensed something was wrong. They seemed so lonely. From their questions and comments it was obvious that they were devoid of friends or at least recent contacts with old friends. He wondered why, but would not ask lest he embarrass them.

What he had sensed was correct — they were lonely. For the past month they had isolated themselves in their house, refusing to see anyone for fear their secret would be discovered. If it became known that their little daughter had the smallpox she would be sent to the pesthouse and would probably die from lack of care. Sylvester was a welcome sight. Being blind he would be oblivious of the many telltale signs that there was smallpox in the house. They so wanted and needed the company of another adult that they never considered that they were exposing Sylvester to smallpox.

A few days after the visit Sylvester came down with smallpox and was hustled off to the pesthouse. He was one of the more fortunate victims — he ultimately recovered. There was a period of time when he was extremely sick and it severely sapped his strength. As he began to recover he became restless and kept insisting that he be allowed out of bed.

"You are too weak", the nurse explained, "you can't stand yet."

"Yes, I can!" a very cocky Sylvester replied, "you bet I can!"

"Oh! You think so? Well if you're so sure, try it."

Sylvester got out of bed and stood up. With a self-satisfied look on his face he said, "See", and then suddenly collapsed on the floor. As the nurse stood looking down on him with a satisfied smile on her face, her only comment was a smug, "See". She then assisted him back into bed, and several days passed before she allowed him to once again venture out of bed.

After he recovered from the smallpox Sylvester seriously set out to establish himself as a piano tuner and a professional entertainer. He tuned pianos during the daytime and,

whenever bookings were available, entertained at night and on weekends. Piano tuning was a necessity to support himself, and he planned to continue tuning only until he was well established as an entertainer.

In 1902 there were no such entertainment mediums as television, radio, or motion pictures with sound. There were the opera house, the playhouse, and variety acts. Variety acts were featured in vaudeville, burlesque, floor shows at dances, family night get-togethers, and private parties.

In Newark and its surrounding area there were a lot of bookings available for good variety acts. The acts would register with one or more theatrical agents who specialized in putting together shows for anyone in need of entertainment. The quality and quantity of the entertainment depended on the total budget for a given show. There were times when specific acts were requested, and other times when selection of all or some of the acts were left to the agents' discretion.

The theatrical agent received a commission from each act booked for a show. Among the performers they were more commonly called booking agents. Each agent usually had certain acts that he favored, others that he booked sparingly, and still others that he booked only when absolutely necessary. Moreover, each agent had his own distinct clientele. To assure as many bookings as possible, entertainers usually registered with many agents.

This is what Sylvester did. He knew he would have to work as a low budget act and did so to establish himself with the agents. By doing so he was used quite often as a fill-in act to expand a show. This gave him the exposure he needed to gain recognition. Within a year his rich baritone voice, his trick violin playing and his humorous monologues earned him the recognition he sought, and he was commanding higher fees for his services.

By 1903 Sylvester had ample bookings and his career was reasonably well established. He no longer needed to depend upon piano tuning, but he continued because the extra income from tuning enabled him to continuously expand his act. First it was the xylophone and shortly thereafter two

sets of chimes, one of metal and the other made of bamboo. Because both the xylophone and the chimes are quite similar in note progression to a keyboard, Sylvester had little difficulty in mastering these instruments.

Whatever free time he had during the day was spent practicing or experimenting with his instruments or musical novelties such as the kazoo, the flexetone, and the spoons. For a long time he had been intrigued with the various tones achieved when glass objects such as bottles or drinking glasses were struck with a spoon or by snapping a fingernail against these vessels. He knew it was possible to alter the tone by filling the vessel with varying amounts of water. He began to experiment with twenty bottles that he acquired specifically for that purpose. Each bottle was meticulously filled with water until it produced a specific tone in the musical scale. To do this, each bottle was filled with water until it approximated the tone he desired. Then with the aid of a medicine dropper he painstakingly added or removed water until the tone was perfect.

When it was completed he had a set of twenty bottles standing upright which when struck with a mallet produced melodies in much the same manner as playing a xylophone. He then designed and had Mr. Stanyeski build for him a two-tiered rack for the bottles. This permitted him to stand behind it and play the bottles as he faced his audience. Novelties like this enhanced his act and enabled him to command higher fees.

While Sylvester was completely preoccupied during the day, his evenings provided sufficient recreation for his needs. On those evenings or Sunday afternoons when he did not have bookings, he was socializing. Sunday afternoons were generally reserved for visiting friends but evenings were devoted to his fraternal associations, political clubs and favorite saloons, because being seen and heard in these places helped to generate bookings.

One of Sylvester's favorite Sunday afternoon spots was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bower. They had two daughters, Rose and Weezie, and they opened their home to all of their daughters' friends. It was a sizable home, and the parlor

which contained both an organ and a square piano was filled with young people each Sunday afternoon. Sylvester enjoyed their company and they enjoyed his, but sooner or later he inevitably wound up at the piano or organ.

Rose and Weezie often invited Louise Zenglein to their Sunday afternoon open house, but she always declined. The three girls worked together in a hat factory. Louise, who used her wages to pay for evening sessions at a business college, always gave the same excuse — she had too much homework to finish. The sisters suspected that the real reason was her handicap, a tubercular kneecap which until very recently had forced her to use a crutch. She was now able to hobble about without the aid of the crutch but was obviously embarrassed and discouraged because most of the young men she met were kind but distant.

The sisters decided that because Louise and Sylvester had so much in common they might be attracted to each other. Both were handicapped, both had too much determination and willpower to allow their handicap to deter them, both played the piano and enjoyed music. Rosie and Weezie insisted that Louise come to the next open house. They told her that Sylvester would be there and she had to meet this young man who shared her love for music. They spoke of many things they had in common — music, gentleness, consideration of others, and fun loving — but no mention was made about Sylvester's being blind.

When Louise arrived at the open house Sylvester was playing the piano. Rose had already told him that Louise was coming and how talented she was at the piano. As Rose and Louise crossed the room to where the piano was Louise noticed that Sylvester was so preoccupied with playing that he did not observe them until Rose made the introduction. She was relieved to know that he had not seen her hobbling. As Rose spoke to make the introductions Sylvester turned and faced the direction from which her voice came. Louise never suspected he was blind.

After the introductions Sylvester suggested, "Perhaps you would like to play? I am told you're an excellent piano player."

"No, thank you. I would much prefer to hear you play."

"Anything to please," Sylvester replied, "but sit next to me on the bench and we'll compare notes. Perhaps we can play a duet."

Sylvester played for awhile, then encouraged her to join him in a duet and finally to play some numbers by herself. The afternoon passed quickly with their never leaving the piano. One or the other played as they talked of many things — their work, their past, and their homes — but neither mentioned their handicaps. When it was time to go Sylvester asked if he could escort Louise home, and she agreed. Rose brought over Louise's coat and handed it to her. Louise in turn held out the coat for Sylvester to assist her and was shocked to discover that he was not gentlemanly enough to help her on with her coat. Rose suddenly realized that Louise had not discovered that Sylvester was blind.

"Sylvester," she said after taking the coat from Louise, "here is Louise's coat." Then as she placed the coat in Sylvester's hand she turned to Louise and pointed to her eyes. Sylvester took the coat, quickly felt it to locate the sleeves, and then positioned the coat so that Louise could don it. Unfortunately, he was standing not at her back but at her side. It was then that Louise was first aware that Sylvester could not see. It did not faze her however because her first impression of this man was very favorable and she wanted to get to know him better, and she was accustomed to being around the blind. Since her childhood she had played with and befriended a blind girl of her own age.

When they left the house Sylvester extended his arm for Louise to take. As they walked down the street towards the trolley station, Sylvester quickly recognized by the way she held his arm that Louise was having difficulty walking. She obviously had hurt her leg. He had assumed it to be a temporary thing, perhaps from a fall.

"How did you hurt your leg?" he asked. "Did you slip on the ice?"

Louise knew it would only be a period of time before he would have to know the truth. She had hoped they would first have the chance to know each other a lot better. She was

tempted to say she had slipped on the ice but she realized she had better not put off the inevitable. If he was not interested in a cripple it was better that she knew it now. Reluctantly she told him the truth and expected the worst. This would be their first and last date.

When she finished there was a few seconds of silence that seemed an eternity to her. Then Sylvester chuckled as he said, "Hey, how about that! Tell you what we'll do. I'll be your good leg if you'll be my eyes".... and so began a relationship that would exist for sixty-one years.

With Sylvester's evening bookings and Louise's night classes there were very limited hours available for courtship, but it nevertheless blossomed and they began to talk of marriage. Louise's parents tried every way to discourage the marriage, believing that a blind man would find it almost impossible to support a wife. Louise unsuccessfully tried to explain that entertainers earned big money. She told them how Sylvester was paid as much as \$25 for one night of entertaining, whereas carpenters and plumbers considered themselves lucky to draw down \$3 for an eight-hour day. Her parents found it hard to believe.

When Louise told Sylvester of the difficulties she was having with her parents, he decided that there was only one way to convince them that he was financially able to support a wife and family. His plan was simple but effective. He took Louise and her parents to Coney Island and wined and dined them in such an elegant manner that her parents spoke of it for years afterwards. They were duly impressed. Sylvester had to earn good money to patronize such a restaurant. Sylvester admitted to Louise later that he had been there only once before. It was the previous week when he paid off the *Maitre d'* to greet him like an old customer in front of her parents.

By now Sylvester was addressing Louise by her nickname, Lou. She still addressed him as Sylvester, but she did not particularly care for the name. "Sylvester is such a long and formal name. Don't you have a nickname?"

"No".

"That is odd," she replied, "I thought everybody had a nickname."

"My father called my sisters Aggie and Kate, but he insisted that Stanley and I be called by our Christian names. Come to think of it, I never heard my mother call my father Joe. It was always Joseph."

"That is strange."

"Why? The Institute never allowed us to use nicknames. You called a person only by his formal name. I collected quite a few demerits for getting caught calling my roommate Teddy."

"Didn't anyone ever give you a nickname?"

"Oh, some of the fellows at the saloon call me Syl, and a few times someone called me Silly when they had too much to drink."

"Oh, that is terrible! We have to find a nice nickname for you, something short but different from Syl or Silly. How about Paul?"

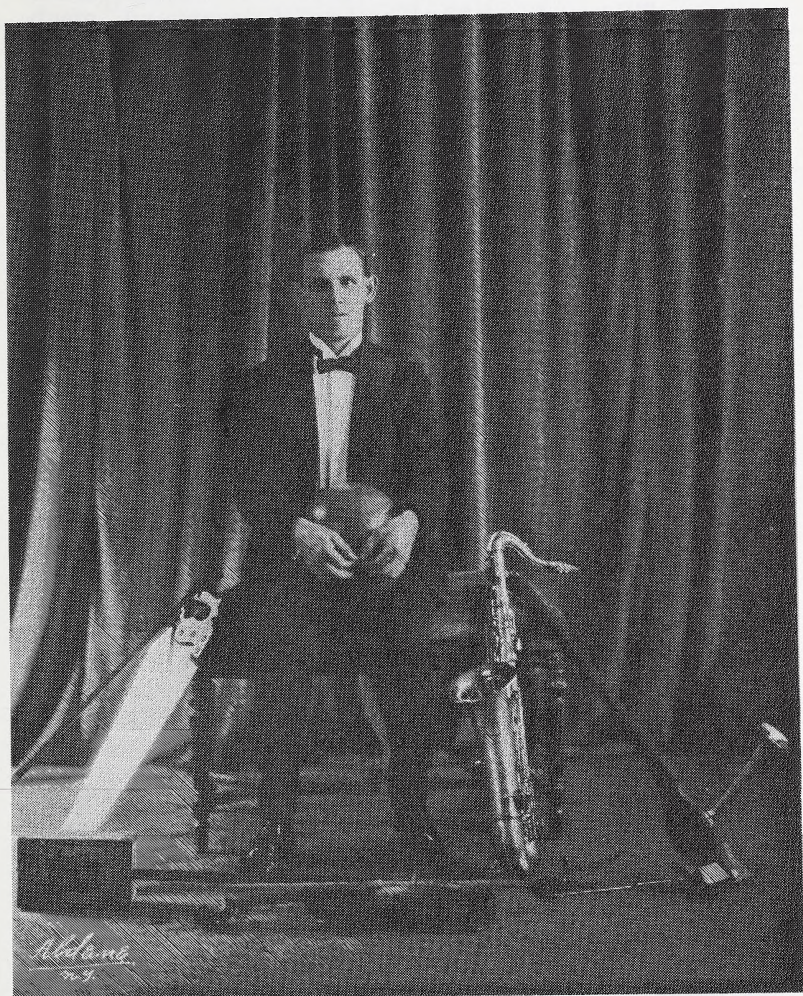
Sylvester was agreeable to anything that would please her.

"If you like it, fine. Call me Paul."

From that day on Louise addressed or referred to him as Paul, and it was not long before he was referring to himself by that name. Some old friends and family clung to his Christian name, but most of them fell into the habit of calling him Paul. In time, the use of the name Sylvester was limited to legal documents, and there were many people who knew him only as Paul Meinert. In the early decades of the twentieth century however, it was being part of a program and the fee he received that were important. How his name was listed on the program mattered little to him. More often it was Musical Meinert, but at times it was Paul Meinert, S. Meinert, Sylvester Meinert, or on rare occasions Professor Meinert. By the late 1920s however it was Paul.

Sylvester adopted the name Paul to please Louise. A short time before that his brother Stanley for some unknown reason had changed his name to Charlie. When their sister Lena heard that Sylvester was changing his name she woe-fully complained, "This is too much! I still have not gotten

accustomed to Stanley being Charlie. Now every time I hear the name Paul I've got to stop and think, who is Paul? Oh, yes, Paul is Sylvester...or was Sylvester".



Chapter V

Recognition

In the spring of 1904 Louise and Sylvester were married — the act known as Musical Meinert became The Musical Meinerts — and program billings began to refer to Sylvester as Paul Meinert. During their courtship the couple had spent long hours planning and practicing for the day when Louise could join the act. It still featured the many talents of Sylvester, but background music provided by Louise enhanced the act.

Prior to meeting Louise, Sylvester's whole existence evolved around a stage and an audience. For the first time in his adult life he had found something far more compelling, his love for Louise. Nothing was or ever would be as important to him as Louise. He changed his name for her; changed his act to include her in it; and for the next sixty years turned over all his earnings for her to manage. Louise returned that love with equal devotion. What was said in jest less than a year before became a lifetime reality. She literally was his eyes, and he was her good leg.

Louise encouraged Paul to experiment with wine glasses. They had seen an act in which wine glasses were filled with water, similar to Paul's bottles, and played in one of two ways. The musical tones were produced by a violin bow sliding over the lip of a glass, or by sliding the palm of a hand across the lip of the glass. At first, filling the glasses with the exact quantity of water was just as time consuming as filling the bottles. Then Louise found a faster way — painting a red line on the side of each glass or bottle to identify the proper waterline. Louise filled each glass or bottle to the water line, and Paul made the minor adjustments with the medicine

dropper.

Paul persisted with the experiment until he perfected his technique and then taught Louise. "Let's work up some duets," he suggested, "and we'll add it to the act." Two years later, satisfied that their performance had the necessary professionalism, he added the glasses to the act.

Meanwhile, the idea of duets pleased him. He taught Louise to play the chimes and made the chimes' duet a featured part of the act. He then purchased a set of cathedral bells and worked up a duet for the bells. Finally, the wine glasses were added to the act, and Louise shared the spotlight with Paul each time the chimes, bells, or glasses were featured. Now, he was happy. His beloved Lou was not just an accompanist — she was truly part of the act.

For the first six months of their marriage the Musical Meinerts was basically the same act as when Paul performed alone, the only difference being the musical accompaniment provided by Louise.

Suddenly, Louise was pregnant. It was unanticipated and unexpected. After a seven month pregnancy their first child, Mildred, was born prematurely and weighed only two and a quarter pounds. The doctor offered little or no hope for her survival. She had to be fed with a medicine dropper and carried about on heavy wads of cotton. Paul arranged for a nurse until Louise was capable of tending to the baby's needs. Then for the next ten months Louise was preoccupied with the baby, and Paul reverted to his single act.

Mildred might have been small but she was a healthy infant. She survived and thrived, and when she reached her first birthday Louise no longer felt compelled to be with her at all times. Arrangements were made for an older woman to look after Mildred whenever there were bookings, and Louise rejoined the act.

The rebirth of The Musical Meinerts brought with it the duets on the chimes and cathedral bells, and some six months later the wine glasses. These were all show-stoppers, as was Paul's trick violin playing. The Musical Meinerts act expanded to where it could be one of several acts of a vaudeville show, or it could provide an entire show. In

addition to the four show-stoppers, any one of which could comprise the finale, Paul performed with the xylophone, guitar, harmonica, kazoo, flexetone, and the spoons. He played both classical and popular numbers on the violin, sang, and recited humorous monologues. There was no set program. It depended on the amount of time they were expected to be on the stage, the fee for the performance and requests for specific parts of the act.

The wine glasses, bottles, chimes, and cathedral bells were part of their Big Act. It commanded a higher fee because it was spectacular and because of the cost of transporting the heavy cases in which they were packed. Their Small Act consisted of any or all of the other components of the Big Act with one proviso: Instruments were limited to those Paul could transport without the aid of a drayman.

Paul had never been happier in his life. Mildred was healthy and normal in size and weight, the act was continually expanding, bookings were plentiful, and he had Louise to share the good times with him. Since they first set up housekeeping, their parlor had been graced by an upright piano and they had just purchased an Edison phonograph—the forerunner of the present day tape recorder. It was a machine with a large morning-glory horn, quite similar to the horn on the record player of that era, the Victrolas. Its waxed cylinders served the same purpose as present day tapes. As one spoke or sung into a special mouthpiece, the voice was recorded on a wax cylinder and subsequently played back.

Their parlor had been their rehearsal hall. Only on rare occasions had it fulfilled its normal function—a room for socializing with guests. Until recently Paul and Louise had been too busy building their act and tending to Mildred. There had been little time for socializing. Now that there was time they wanted to share it with family and friends. Thus began a custom that lasted for decades. Guests congregated in the parlor to hear Paul and Louise entertain, to join in sing-a-longs, to enjoy the novelty of hearing their voices on the phonograph, and at the end of the evening to gather around the dining room table for a sumptuous German

supper of cheeses, cold cuts and salads.

Invitations were seldom refused and unexpected guests were always welcomed. Friends tended to await an invitation — family members did not. Louise's parents, her sister, her two brothers' families, and the families of Paul's brother and sisters were frequent visitors. The most welcomed guest was Joseph Meinert. At the time of Paul's marriage Lena had arranged a reconciliation between Paul and his father. Joseph was pleased that his son still maintained the piano tuning business even though it was obvious that he was far more successful as an entertainer. Paul was pleased that his father publicly acknowledged that his son was a successful entertainer. Joseph, however, never called him Paul. His name was and always would be Sylvester.

Paul's mother had died while he was traveling with the medicine show, and Joseph had recently remarried. Paul had not been made aware of his mother's death; and if he had been, distance and circumstances would have prevented him from attending her funeral. This never disturbed him. Josephine had been too cold and distant for him to have any filial feelings for her. His new stepmother however was very cordial and had aided Lena in bringing about the reconciliation. To Paul she was a great stepmother — a warm and delightful person.

Paul no longer had to circulate among clubs and saloons to generate business. His agents provided ample bookings. He continued to attend formal meetings of his clubs and fraternal organizations, not so much for business as for social reasons and, occasionally, frequented his favorite saloons to socialize with old friends. Most of his free evenings however were spent in his home. There was still the need to have an audience to entertain, but bookings and house guests were sufficient to fill that need.

In May of 1906 Paul performed at the Third Annual Concert and Reception given by the blind in Germania Hall in Newark. It marked the beginning of a twenty-five year tradition of benefit performances for those less fortunate than himself — inmates of poorhouses, orphanages, mental

hospitals, veterans' hospitals, and immigrants temporarily confined at Ellis Island.

In the summer of 1906 Paul and Louise contracted for their first series of performances. That season they were featured each Sunday in the dining room of Clinton Park Place. The flyer promoting Clinton Park Place described it as follows:

"Clinton Park Place... Walter Martens, Proprietor... Books open for parties, Basket Parties and Societies... Up to date Shooting Gallery, Dining Room Opened Sundays. Wine, Liquor, and Cigars ... 302 Clinton Place, Newark. N.J. Music Every Sunday (Rain or Shine) By the Musical Meinerts — Dining Room — Headquarters for Automobile Parties."

Paul and Louise enjoyed entertaining family audiences that frequented the picnic groves and amusement parks of that era. Picnic groves offered Sunday entertainment together with dining room and picnic facilities. In addition to all these facilities, amusement parks featured rides and games of chance. All were accessible by trolley car and encouraged automobile parties.

Paul and Louise classified their performances as family entertainment. Paul performed solo at smokers; he would not expose Louise to smokers. Bookings for burlesque were never accepted under any circumstances. This was underscored in later years by including "High Class Entertainers" in their advertising.

The year 1906 had been an exceptionally good one for the Musical Meinerts, and Louise planned a New Year's Night supper party to welcome in 1907. As was the custom in those days, Paul joined his pals on New Year's Day to celebrate the arrival of the new year. Meanwhile, some of the womenfolk of the family were helping Louise prepare supper for the New Year's Night festivities. Paul and his pals obviously celebrated somewhat more than they should, or they never would have undertaken or even seen the humor in the hoax they decided to perpetrate on their wives.

There was an undertaker among the revelers and he was not adverse to using his horse-drawn hearse for the

New Year's prank. A visit was planned to each of the reveler's homes. Whoever's house was next to be visited was to lie on the stretcher and be placed in the hearse. When they reached the house four other revelers would remove the stretcher from the hearse and solemnly carry it into the house.

One of Louise's guests spotted the hearse as it pulled up in front of the house. The women, including Louise, peered from the windows to see what was going on. They watched as the four men slowly removed the stretcher from the hearse and moved toward the house. It was then that they recognized Paul who was laying face up on the stretcher, his hands crossed at his chest, his hat resting atop his stomach and his face ashen white from an overdose of talcum powder.

Louise became hysterical and the other women rushed to comfort her. By the time the revelers had toted Paul up the stairs and into the room, the women had gotten Louise seated in a chair and were trying to console her. Paul, hearing Louise in all her anguish, sat upright on the stretcher and disconcertedly complained, "Oh boy, Lou! You don't have any sense of humor at all! Try to do something funny and you get hysterical!"

The sound of Paul's voice startled Louise and triggered a series of outbursts in quick order. First was the shock upon recognizing his voice, then the relief with the awareness that he was alive, and finally the devastating anger engendered by the realization of what he had done. Louise's guests supplemented it with their own tirades, all of which now seemed very funny to Paul and his friends. They laughingly filed out of the house deciding where to go next.

Paul returned home later expecting to enjoy the New Year's Night festivities. He entered with a big grin on his face, anticipating that by now everybody had time to think about the prank and realized how funny it was. The grin quickly faded with the realization that not one woman, including Louise, would speak to him. Fortunately for Paul some of the men of the family had arrived before he did. They had been aware of what had happened but tactfully avoided the subject lest they add fuel to the already flaming fire. No

matter what their feelings were about the episode they were guests in Paul's home and as such would not ignore him.

After the guests left, Louise broke her silence and castigated Paul unmercifully. Try as he would there was no way to explain away what he had done, nor could he ever convince Louise that there was a shred of humor in it. Several days passed before Louise's icy reserve melted. It was a new experience for him. His Lou had never before treated him this way. He lived grumpily through the experience but he heeded the message; never again did he attempt anything so foolish.

In 1905 a new form of entertainment came into existence in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was the use of a screen as a story-telling medium. Its showcase was the nickelodeon, the forerunner of present day movie theatres. The name nickelodeon derived its name from the admission price—one nickel. By 1908 nickelodeons had spread to Newark, and Paul's brother Charlie was operating the projector for a nickelodeon.

Programs consisted of several one-reel films, each containing a separate story. Community singing was also part of such programs and featured a singer who led the audience in song. Glass slides containing the words of popular songs were used to project the words on the screen to cue the audience and encourage audience participation in the sing-a-longs.

Charlie's boss was having difficulty in getting a singer for his nickelodeon. Charlie recommended his brother and sister-in-law as a team, Paul as the singer and Louise at the piano. After a bit of negotiating Paul and Louise agreed to do the sing-a-longs. Daytime performances presented no problems, but their evening performances had to be concluded by 8:00 pm to allow them ample time to fulfill any nightly bookings that might develop.

One afternoon approximately six months after they started, a telegram was delivered to Paul and Charlie at the nickelodeon advising them of the death of their father. The owner of the nickelodeon tendered his condolences and offered to shut down, but Paul and Charlie insisted on

finishing out the day to give him time to secure a substitute operator and sing-a-long team for the next few days. A few hours later the messenger returned with a second telegram reporting the death of their stepmother. Again the owner offered to shut down, but the brothers would not disappoint the audience and they finished out the day.

Paul and Louise continued the heavy work schedule of evening bookings and nickelodeon sing-a-longs for three years. They did not consider it to be a heavy work schedule for they enjoyed what they were doing. Paul even made it fun getting to and from the nickelodeon in snowy weather. Knowing how difficult it was for Louise to walk through the snow, he insisted on pulling her on the sled.

Paul required only four or five hours sleep a night and he could not stand inactivity. By 1908 he had already developed the habit of working during the day and entertaining at night — a habit that continued for half a century. Even with the heavy schedule of sing-a-longs at the nickelodeon and bookings later at night, he managed to occasionally tune pianos in the morning, publish his first song, experiment with new novelties for the act, and rehearse for upcoming bookings.

With the advent of motion pictures there was a demand for variety acts willing to travel. As more and more nickelodeons and their successors, the motion picture houses, were scattered around the countryside, vaudeville circuits came into being. It was the era of the silent, black-and-white movies. Vaudeville, with an orchestra in the pit and a series of variety acts on stage, brought to audiences sound, color, and a special type of mesmerism that exists only when audiences can see and respond to live performances. The larger and more prominent moving picture houses regularly interspersed a vaudeville show between screenings of the featured picture. Some of the smaller houses included vaudeville once or twice a week as an added attraction.

One of Paul's booking agents was actively engaged in providing talent for vaudeville circuits and constantly prodded Paul and Louise to join the circuit. They were not too

enthused for it meant being away from home, moving from city to city for numerous weeks, and living in different boarding houses each week while trying to raise a five-year old child. Finally, when the agent guaranteed them one hundred and fifty dollars a week with the possibility of doubling that fee on subsequent contracts, Paul and Louise succumbed.

In ten weeks they would earn more than most people earned in a year. In 1910 a five room apartment with improvements rented for twelve dollars a month. Railroads were offering brakemen and firemen seventy-five to one hundred dollars a month depending upon experience. Prime rib roasts sold at sixteen to eighteen cents a pound and fast clippers out of New York City were quoting round-trip fares to Bermuda for twenty dollars.

On their first circuit they were the second act to perform. The first act usually commanded the lowest fee and was a silent act such as jugglers, acrobats, or animals. This act was used to warm up the audience. Each succeeding act up to and including the next to the last act usually commanded a higher fee than the act that preceded it. More times than not, the last act was a lower paid act because the audiences habitually started walking out during the last act. For this reason the featured act always preceded the last act on the bill.

The Musical Meinerts act had to prove itself; if the audiences responded enthusiastically the act would be re-signed for another circuit, would be given a better billing and paid a higher fee. Paul had learned how to please crowds while with the medicine show and while working his way back home after Baxter left him stranded in Ohio. He knew that audiences varied from city to city in their likes and dislikes. He made it a point in each city to find out the musical preferences of the local audiences and he catered to these preferences.

The act was well received throughout the entire circuit. Paul and Louise adjusted easily to life on the circuit. Louise was the business manager. She made all the arrangements for the railroad tickets, baggage handling by the railroad

and drayman, selection of boarding houses, and publicity. Each theater had a bulletin board on which was posted all pertinent information relevant to the acts. This included a listing of nearby boarding houses that catered to transient vaudeville performers.

On arrival at the theater Louise would present professional pictures of the act to the theater manager for display in the theater lobby. Louise and Paul would then make a quick inspection of the stage and dressing rooms to determine what if any problems existed. After that, the bulletin board was checked for names and locations of boarding houses. It was important to quickly arrange for suitable, comfortable quarters and get back to the theater by the time the baggage arrived from the railroad station.

Paul not only had to check and assure that all the instruments and props had not been damaged, but he had to familiarize himself with both the stage and backstage areas. On stage he would pace off the distance along the curtain from the wings to center stage. He then paced off the distance from the curtain to the footlights and from the curtain to the backdrop. His instruments and novelties were always placed in a set fashion at center stage. To the audience Paul always appeared to be freely moving back and forth on stage, but his movements were controlled somewhat like a dancer's. It was always so many steps forward, backward, or to the side.

There were some very subtle signals that supplemented his mental images of the stage. Louise, who always accompanied him, was on stage at the piano before he came on stage. She played his introductory music, and built into it was a signal, a special chord, that confirmed he was at center stage. There were similar signals to caution him to move a step forward, backward, to the left or to the right. These signals were so blended into the music that only a trained musician was apt to detect them.

The signals had been used by Paul and Louise for several years. They were more often needed for a floor show than a stage. Entertainers at floor shows performed on a dance floor which was usually surrounded by tables and chairs.

Audiences were unpredictable and at times inconsiderate. They permitted their chairs to encroach on the dance floor and occasionally someone took a short cut across the dance floor while the performer was entertaining. Except for these signals Paul would have been oblivious of such hazards. With the musical cues he was able to move about the floor with almost as much freedom as a sighted person.

Cues that helped Paul assert his independence were important to him. He was a proud man and did not want to appear helpless. At the boarding house dinner table Louise would as unobtrusively as possible cut his meat, tell him what was on the platter, and using Lena's clock game technique describe where each item was located on the platter.

While Louise as business manager for the act handled all the finances, she insisted that Paul carry some money for incidentals that cropped up. Except for pennies and dimes he could easily identify coins by their size. The texture of the pennies and dimes differed, but the only sure way he could identify them was to have one of each for comparison. The dime was slightly smaller.

Paper money created no problem because it was coded for identification by the manner in which it was folded. The two dollar bill which was very common in those days was folded in half to form a square. The five dollar bill was folded in half in a long, narrow, oblong shape. The tens and twenties were kept in another section of his wallet and uniquely folded for quick identification. Louise, or in later years his daughters, identified the denominations of the bills for him to code. When he made a purchase he requested single dollar bills in change. It was the only way to be sure that he was not short-changed.

While on the circuit Paul seldom purchased anything without Louise being present to make the transaction. Quite often, after the last performance of the night, many of the acts would go out together for a late supper or a nightcap. Louise always insisted that Paul pay their share of the bill. She felt it would be embarrassing and demeaning to Paul to have his wife be the only woman in the group anteing up for

the bill.

Paul and Louise enjoyed their life on the circuit. At times it was strenuous, traveling between cities was often hectic and uncomfortable, and theater conditions were not always ideal; but the audiences were receptive and the vaudevillians on the bills were for the most part friendly and fun-loving. When Paul and Louise were on stage one of the other family acts looked after Mildred, and Louise reciprocated while they were on stage.

The first circuit was a financial success. They cleared a minimum of seventy-five dollars a week after all expenses. The expenses varied from city to city but never exceeded:

Maximum Weekly Expenses

Room and Board for Three	\$20
Railway Fares	10
Baggage Handling	25
Miscellaneous	15
1/4 of Monthly Rental on Newark Apartment	4
Total Weekly Expenses	\$74

Paul and Louise could not resist the offers to go out on additional circuits since the fee for the act increased with each new tour. By the end of the second year they were receiving three hundred dollars per week and their expenses were still not exceeding seventy-five dollars a week. Never had they been happier. Their bank account was bulging, they enjoyed entertaining, and they were constantly meeting new people and having fun.

Mildred was now part of the act, much to the delight of the audiences. After acknowledging the applause of the audience for what they thought was the end of the act, Paul would announce that because they were so receptive he had a special treat for them. As Louise placed a milk bottle crate next to the chimes, Mildred walked onto the stage carrying a small wooden mallet in each hand. She walked over to the chimes, stepped up on the crate and began to play a simple

little tune on the chimes. The sight of that little girl standing on a crate and extending her arms upward to reach the chimes never failed to excite the audience.

Paul and Louise limited themselves to two or three tours a year and never accepted a tour for the summer months. Between tours they accepted local bookings, socialized with family and friends, and rehearsed for the next tour. Vaudeville acts seldom changed from year to year. Audiences returned to the theaters, season after season, to hear or see their favorite acts and often knew the routines so well they could detect any change in the routines. The Musical Meinerts act remained constant insofar as the featured instruments and novelties were concerned, but they changed some of the musical selections and added new novelties such as the miniature harmonica and a common rubber hose.

The miniature harmonica was a small four-note harmonica that could be hidden in Paul's mouth. Initially as he played it, it was hidden in the mouth and he looked around as if he was trying to find out who was interrupting his act. Then, while facing the audience, he would let the harmonica slip out of his mouth so that it was held by his lips. After a few bars, the harmonica would disappear into his mouth and reappear at regular intervals until the number was finished.

The rubber hose was similar to those used with syringes. It was approximately 18" long and 7/16" in diameter. Melodies were created by the passage of air through the hose. Paul held one end of the hose in his mouth and blew into it as he squeezed the opposite end of the hose with his fingers. The fingers manipulated the size of the opening through which the air escaped. By altering the size of the opening, he changed the tone.

The Musical Meinerts traveled the vaudeville circuit for four years, from 1910 through May of 1914. By then, Louise was pregnant and expecting a second child in November. Traveling the circuit with two children would be difficult. Mildred, at nine years of age, needed the benefit of an uninterrupted education. Their bank account was substantial, and Louise was anxious to settle down. Reluctantly, Paul agreed to forego any more tours.

With Louise pregnant, Paul once again reverted to his single act. He had become accustomed to days and nights crowded with activities. The sudden imposed inactivity made him restless. He experimented with novelties, tried song writing and reestablished his piano tuning business. Still there was too much inactivity and he began to look around for something to fill the daytime hours.

In late October Paul became aware of a nearby music store that was up for sale. He was excited with the thought of owning and operating his own store. When he broached the idea to Louise she was too preoccupied with her pregnancy to give it serious consideration. It was obvious how badly Paul wanted that music store. Louise didn't want to hurt him, but still vivid in her mind was the constant and unending care needed by Mildred for almost a year after her birth. If her second child needed the same attention, there would be no time for the music store. She decided to stall the final decision until after the baby was born.

"Let's not be too hasty," she cautioned. "It may not be everything you hope it is. It should be carefully checked out".

"How do you propose we do it?"

"Tell the owner you're interested in buying, but only if you can learn the business", she suggested. "Offer to work days at the store for three months without remuneration, provided the owner teaches you to run the business".

"But Lou, it might be sold by then and we would lose out".

"I know, Paul, but it's better that we know what we're getting into. Besides, we can't make any plans until after the baby comes".

As usual, Paul acceded to Louise's wishes. When Paul made the proposal to the owner, he agreed to teach Paul to operate the store but reserved the right to sell it if someone met his terms. When Paul started working at the music shop it was comparable to turning a kid loose in a toy shop. He was surrounded by a variety of musical instruments. Those that were unfamiliar became a challenge. He had to learn to play the saxophone, flute, cello and drums.

On November 7 the baby was born and they named her Janet. She was a healthy normal-sized baby, needing none

of the special care that Mildred required. Louise was relieved, and after much pressuring by Paul agreed to pay a binder for the option to purchase the store by no later than March 1, 1915, with the proviso that the owner continue to teach Paul to operate it until that date.

Paul had already decided upon the name — Meinerts Music Shop. The shop was a natural for Paul and Louise. Both were professional pianists and Paul played numerous instruments. He was also an accredited piano tuner. The ability to play the piano was most important for two reasons. Pianos were the most frequently sold instruments. It was not uncommon for people of average means to own an upright piano or possibly a grand piano.

Those who owned pianos required sheet music; and music shops, along with the music departments of variety and department stores, were the purveyors of popular music. They, along with professional entertainers, were the sellers of songs. There were no high-powered advertising agencies, disc jockeys, or sound motion pictures to catapult a song into prominence.

Sheet music departments featured a piano and piano player. If a customer was interested in buying a particular song, he could hand the sheet music to the piano player and ask that it be played. When not complying with customers' requests the piano player played selections of his own choice, to attract customers to the sheet music department. Song writers encouraged and sometimes compensated piano players in major sheet music outlets to feature their songs. Piano players in the sheet music departments were the forerunners of the present day disc jockeys.

Immediately following the payment of the binder for the music shop, Louise began to have some misgivings about their haste in making the deal. The new baby appeared to be healthy but she cried constantly, day and night. It was a nerve-wracking time of little sleep and great concern for Louise and Paul. It was the main topic of their conversations and often induced arguments engendered by interrupted sleep that made Paul cross and irritable.

Paul occasionally stopped in at Pat Gunning's saloon for

an hour or two and usually commented on his need to escape from the crying. He dwelled on the subject sufficiently long or often enough to inspire Pat Gunning. From somewhere, probably a broken doll, Gunning acquired a gadget which when turned over created the sound of a baby's cry. The next time Paul entered Gunning's and for a long time thereafter, Gunning placed the gadget on the bar in front of Paul and kept turning it over. "Oh, no!", Paul wailed, "I come here to escape the crying. Now it's following me here.!"

There was a simple reason for the constant crying, but it remained a mystery until a friend observed how little Louise was feeding Janet. "No wonder the poor thing is crying," she remarked, "you're starving that baby! You've got to give her much bigger portions of farina. She is still hungry!"

Louise at that point was willing to try anything. She prepared another portion of farina and continued to feed the baby until she would no longer accept it. After that the crying stopped, and for the first time Janet slept through the night. Unwittingly, Louise had judged Janet's needs on her experience with Mildred who weighed less than two and a half pounds at birth. Janet however weighed nine and a half pounds at birth. While Louise had fed Janet more than she fed Mildred, it was not enough for a normal-sized baby.

The crying problem was resolved in late December, and Paul convinced Louise to complete the purchase of the music store on December 31. By retaining the present staff, which consisted of a young girl for the sheet music department and a young man doubling as a handyman and salesman, it was possible for Paul and Louise both to be away from the store at the same time. This seldom happened, but if the fee for an afternoon booking was lucrative enough, they didn't hesitate to do it. Generally they were both at the store; however Paul did go to customers' homes to tune pianos and Louise occasionally went to New York for supplies or remained at home to tend to other matters.

Their music store venture lasted for six months. For Louise, with a small infant to tend to, it was strictly a business. It was time consuming, sometimes irritating, and

devoid of fun that always surrounded their vaudeville circuits. Paul, with all the different types of instruments at his disposal, enjoyed himself immensely, but nevertheless longed to be back on the vaudeville circuit. Thus, when the store was destroyed by fire in June of 1915, there was no compulsion to quickly reopen in a new location. Instead, they signed a summer contract to entertain at Olympic Park in Irvington, New Jersey.

Paul was anxious to go back on the vaudeville circuit in the fall, but Louise was just as anxious to stay at home. Then Louise found the ideal situation. Dreamland, a nickelodeon within walking distance from their home, was for sale. By now the fire insurance company had reimbursed them for their music store losses and it was more than ample to buy the nickelodeon. Paul would have daily audiences, and they could enjoy the comfort of their own home.

It did not take much persuasion. Paul was always anxious to please his Lou. Only Louise's father was opposed to it. The war in Europe concerned him. It was true that President Wilson was maintaining the neutrality of the United States, but Louise's father believed war was inevitable. Sooner or later the United States would be at war and with the recent sinking of the Lusitania, he believed it would be sooner. "If war comes," he warned, "there will be no audiences — you'll go broke".

Paul and Louise disregarded the warning and purchased Dreamland. Once again, the Meinerts were conducting sing-a-longs. Two acts of vaudeville were presented each Saturday, and amateur nights were occasionally featured. All this was offered for the price of one nickel and was a profitable enterprise.

The Musical Meinerts' act continued to accept late evening bookings, and segments of the act comprised one of Dreamland's two acts of vaudeville. On rare occasions they hired a temporary manager for the nickelodeon and traveled with their act. One such occasion, in February of 1916, they traveled to Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, for a benefit performance to raise money for the hungry people in war-torn Poland.

Nanticoke, a coal mining town, had a large colony of people of Polish descent. Some of Lena's in-laws living in Nanticoke urged Lena to prevail upon her brother to provide entertainment for the benefit. There was no hesitation on the part of Paul or Louise. They took the Big Act to Nanticoke.

Lena's relatives were very grateful and insisted that Louise and Paul be their house guests. After the show their hosts were trying to find ways to show their appreciation, but Paul and Louise would not allow it. Finally, Louise shocked them with the suggestion, "I'll tell you what you can do. Take us down the coal mine. I've always wanted to see a coal mine".

Their host, a mine foreman, readily agreed, but the women were stunned. They had never gone down into the mine nor would they ever. They told Louise about the dampness, the dirt and the dangers, but nothing dismayed her. The next morning Louise and Paul were given a tour of the mine and enjoyed it immensely. When they returned to the house the women asked Louise if she had seen any of the big rats in the mine.

"Rats?", Louise exclaimed in horror, "no, thank God, I didn't see any rats. That is the one thing you never mentioned. If I had known that, I would never have gone down there!"

Louise was fascinated by what she saw, but it was Paul with his unending questions that fascinated the miners. They could not perceive how a blind man could be so observant. His nose detected odors so slight and commonplace to them that they went unnoticed. He wanted to know what caused each and every odor. His sense of touch revealed the shoring that supported the tunnels and differences in the structure of the rock that formed the walls along the tunnels, and he wanted to know about shoring a tunnel. He questioned slight changes in air movement, or temperature, which to him suggested an intersection of tunnels, an air vent, or a deadend pocket along the tunnel. After the tour, one of the miners shook his head in amazement, "I swear Paul saw more things down there in the mine than sighted visitors see".

Paul often said, "I might be sightless but I am not blind". What his eyes could not perceive, his other senses generally did. His never ending questions concerning the things he sensed about him provided him with abundant meaningful knowledge and interesting trivia, and he had the faculty to retain and recall that which he learned.

Paul and Louise were members of the PEONYS, Professional Entertainers of New York State. Shortly after they purchased the nickelodeon, Paul attended an evening meeting of the PEONYS at the Hotel McAlpine in New York City. He had gone by himself because Louise could not secure a baby sitter. After the meeting he started home and had barely reached the corner when he was hailed by Jock Harris, a fellow PEONY from Newark. "Is that you, Paul? It's so foggy, I can't see a darn thing. I think I'm lost!"

Paul laughed and replied, "Yep, it's me. Hang on to me and I'll get you home".

Jock took Paul's arm and Paul escorted him back to Newark without difficulty. At the next meeting there was much conversation about that pea-soup fog. Jock Harris rose, related what had happened, and jokingly told the group, "If you ever get lost in a fog, latch onto Paul Meinert — he can see to get you home".

Paul was always inquisitive about his surroundings. He would ask Louise or his daughters the name of the street they happened to be on, the names of the streets that intersected it, and information on significant landmarks such as subway entrances, bus stops, and distinctive buildings. He catalogued these in his mind and when they next retraced their steps he would check with them his recollection of the area. Areas he traveled frequently soon became fixed in his mind, and he then traveled them alone without difficulty.

Paul had a special booking in New York City and Mildred accompanied him. On the way, they stopped at a restaurant to eat. During the meal Paul commented that his food had an odd taste. Unknown to him, it was tainted. Most people would have pushed the plate away, but not Paul. He was never one to leave any food on his plate. He finished what was on his plate and went on to the job. Just before going on

stage, he told Mildred that he did not feel well. He nevertheless went on and performed as usual. When finished, he took his bow, stepped off the stage into the wing, and immediately fainted. Stagehands quickly revived him, and he heard the audience still applauding. He forced himself up, walked out on stage, and took a second bow. When he stepped off stage again he had to be helped back to the dressing room, but the determination that enabled him to perform surfaced again and gave him strength to return to Newark.

The nickelodeon worked out just as Louise had hoped it would. Paul was content. While the nickelodeon took up much of his time, he still had time to fulfill late evening bookings and to enjoy his family and his home. The parlor was still the rehearsal hall and entertainment center when there were guests, but the kitchen was the hub of family activity. In the kitchen everything centered around Louise who was constantly busy preparing meals, reading newspapers aloud to Paul, sewing, washing, or planning their next party. Paul, when at home was usually found seated at the kitchen table engrossed in one of his hobbies, fooling around with the children, or gabbing with Louise.

He delighted in hoodwinking the girls, and Mildred often fell prey to his con-man activities. One evening Paul was aware that Mildred had for the first time mashed the potatoes. When he sat down to eat, he tasted the potatoes and then turned to Louise and said, "Gosh, Lou, these potatoes are mashed beautifully. I never remember them tasting so good!"

"I mashed them, Poppa", Mildred proudly announced.

He appeared to be shocked but pleased by her revelation. He praised her profusely, and several times throughout the meal commented, "Nobody can mash potatoes like Mildred does". Mildred was duly impressed with her special skill and for a long time thereafter the mere repetition of that statement motivated her to mash the potatoes.

St. Barnabas Hospital, now located in Livingston, New Jersey, was on the corner of Montgomery and Quitman Streets, and the Meinert's house faced one side of the

hospital building. When Paul and Louise went to the hospital to visit a fellow entertainer who had broken his back, he requested a favor. His room was on the Quitman Street side of the building and he occasionally heard Paul and Louise rehearsing. Would they please play louder and keep their windows open whenever possible? Commercial radio stations were not yet in existence and reading was the only form of recreation available to hospital patients.

Paul and Louise were surprised by the request. They pointed out that rehearsals included a great deal of repetition. Their friend replied that this made little difference; it provided delightful interludes in an otherwise dreary existence, so much so that patients able to sit out on the hospital porches always strived to be on the porches whenever they were rehearsing. From that day on, not only did they play loud and keep the windows open as much as possible, but Paul always faced the windows when singing or playing his hand-held instruments. Many of the nurses made it a point to seek them out to tell them how much the patients enjoyed it and how beneficial it was for them.

That summer a priest from St. Mary's Church was in the parlor auditioning *The Musical Meinerts* for St. Mary's annual vaudeville show. Throughout the audition, Janet danced to the music in the same manner as any other two-year old child. Louise was facing the piano and could not see her, and Paul was also unaware of her dancing. The priest was highly amused. When the audition ended, he said, "Fine, I'll take her".

Paul was dismayed. He assumed the priest wanted to book Louise as a single act. "I'm sorry", he blurted, "we work only as a team".

"No problem! *The Musical Meinerts* are hired; but how about making it a threesome?" He then told them of Janet's behavior and urged them to work her into the act. "The audience will love it!"

Paul agreed, and Janet went on stage for the first time. It was childishly simple. While it lacked the impact of Mildred's playing the chimes at age five, it was well received by the audiences. Louise and Paul were excited. Mildred had

lost interest in the act. Perhaps it would be different with Janet. They decided to send her to dancing school and to develop any musical talents that she might have. Perhaps in time they would again have a daughter in the act.

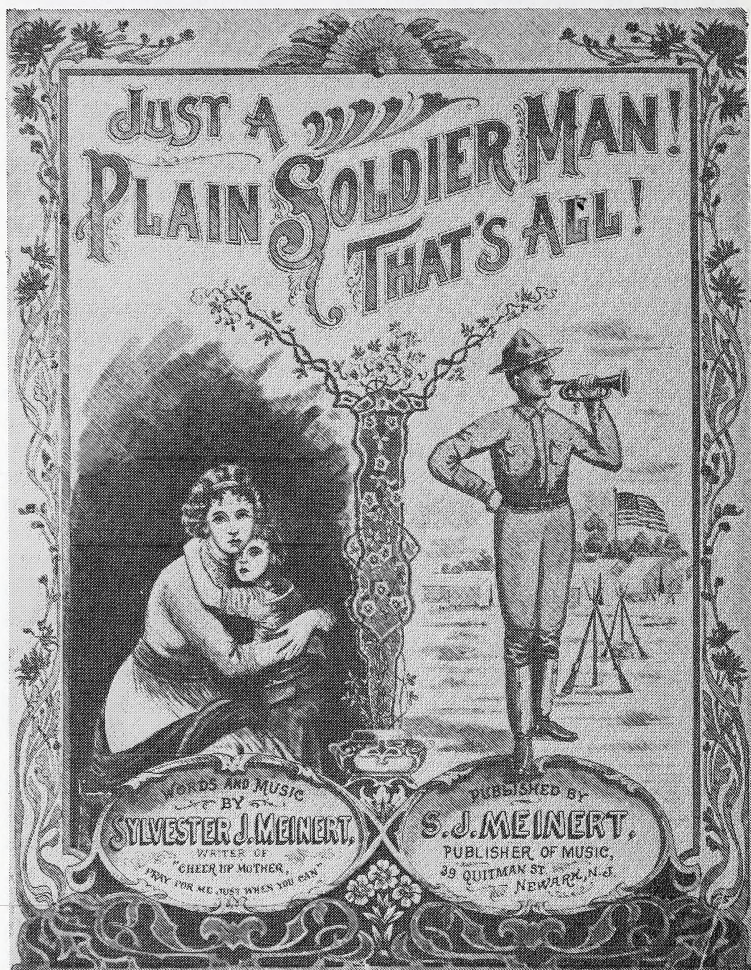
Bookings, rehearsals, and the nickelodeon kept Paul extremely busy, and he enjoyed the excitement of it all. His father-in-law however continually pressed him to sell out. In addition to the war that seemed ever closer, he warned that the motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1914, had started a trend. It was taking motion pictures out of the nickelodeons and into theaters that previously specialized in stage acts. Nickelodeons would soon be extinct.

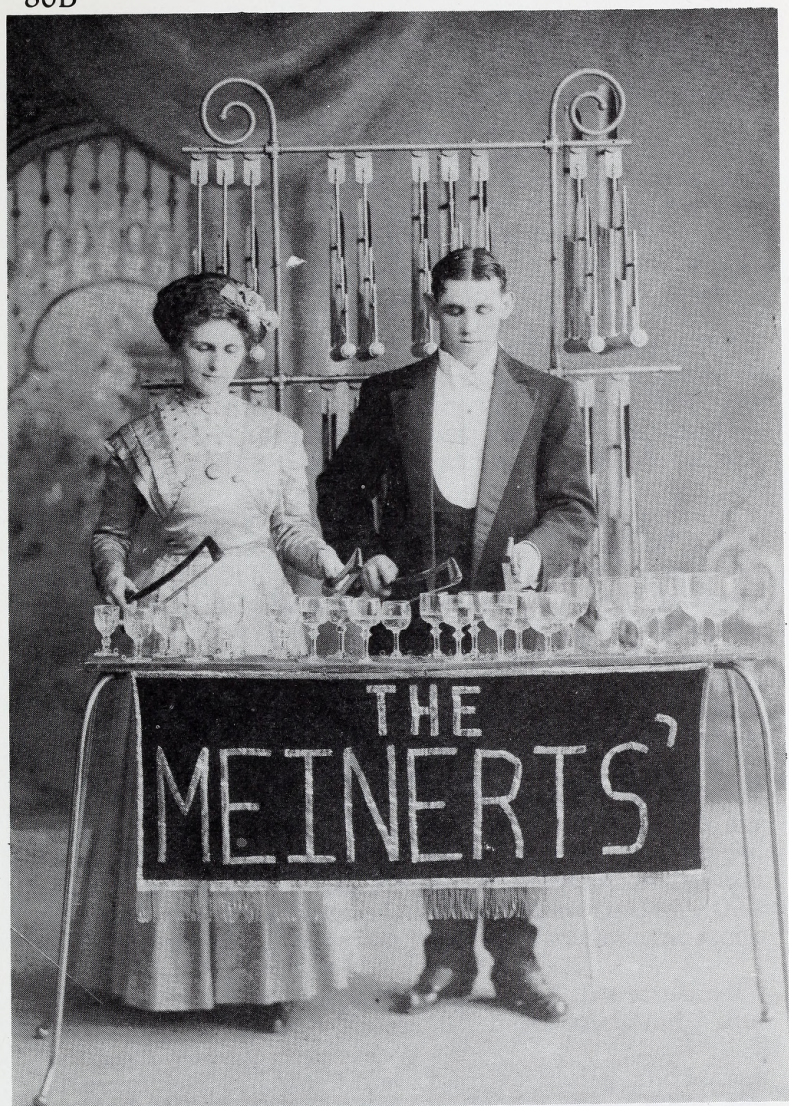
Paul was reluctant to dispose of the nickelodeon and held on until February 1917. When President Wilson summarily sent the German Ambassador home, Paul finally heeded his father-in-law's advice and was fortunate enough to complete the sale on March 15, 1917, a scant three weeks before Congress declared war on Germany.

The war changed the mood of America. Bookings were few and far between. Paul looked for employment in the only other field available to him, piano repair and tuning. It was not difficult to find, for the war had brought a manpower shortage. He applied for a service repairman's job in the piano department of L. Bamberger and Company, Newark's largest department store, and was promptly hired, beginning an association that lasted for eleven years.

It heralded a drastic change in lifestyle. While his new job kept him busy on weekdays, his evenings and Sundays were devoid of activity. He rehearsed despite the lack of bookings, worked up routines for Janet, urged family and friends to drop in, and searched for other activities to keep himself busy. The war was a trying time for him. His patriotism was sincere. He loved his country and was proud to be an American. Many of his friends were called to the colors and he too wanted to serve. He could not accept the fact that the Army would not accept him because he was sightless, and he was forever dreaming up tasks that a sightless soldier could supposedly do.

Paul supported his country in the only way he was able to.







As a member of Bamberger's Choral Club, he participated in their weekly concerts to sell war bonds. He did benefit performances at war bond rallies and wrote patriotic songs such as *Just a Plain Soldier Man, That's All*.

In the spring of 1918 Paul received a letter from the draft board instructing him to report to the Induction Center. He was elated. He was needed. He had been right all along; the Army had found a place for him. It was impossible for Louise to convince him that the letter was sent in error. On the day specified, Paul proudly reported to the Induction Center. It was quickly obvious that Paul could not see. "Cripes, buddy", a callous sergeant snapped, "you're blind! Go home and let us get on with winning the war". Paul was crushed. He returned home and dejectedly told Louise what had transpired. The enormity of his despondency was obvious, but there was little or nothing that Louise could do to ease the hurt.

The war lasted twenty months, and Louise constantly struggled to keep Paul preoccupied. She entertained guests as often as possible, encouraged him to raise canaries, and constantly read to him. For years she had read aloud the newspapers. Now she read for hours on end novels such as, *The Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Woman in White*, and *Lost Horizon*. Paul loved these so much that she reread them to him on several occasions. Often she read until one or two in the morning, or until she was too hoarse to continue.

On one occasion Louise found herself getting sleepy, her voice drifted off, and she lost her place. Shaking off her drowsiness she proceeded to read, but in doing so skipped several passages. Paul quickly called her attention to it and cited the passages she missed. "If you know the story that well", she retorted, "why must I read it? Why can't you recite it to yourself?"

"Ah, Lou, it is such a beautiful story, I like to hear it". Louise smiled as she shook her head knowingly and continued reading.

November 7, 1918, was Janet's fourth birthday, and Louise had baked a birthday cake for the occasion. When the

afternoon paper arrived its blazoned headline screamed, "Armistice Declared". Louise promptly wrapped the headline around the birthday cake to signify a double celebration, but the celebration had to wait. An excited Paul grabbed his hat and saxophone and headed for the door, as he said, "I'll be back, but I don't know when".

He was off to the hub of Newark, Market and Broad Streets, to join the impromptu parade that was sure to form to celebrate the armistice. By the time that he reached Market and Broad Streets, word had gotten around that the news was false. When he arrived back home, the Armistice Declared wrapper was removed from the cake and a lackluster family birthday celebration followed to please a little girl who was yet to learn the meaning of wars and armistices.

Four days later the Armistice was signed and pandemonium broke loose as soon as word reached Newark. Once again, Paul grabbed his saxophone and headed for Broad and Market Streets. This time there was a parade and he was part of it. It was a spontaneous natural outlet for the people to vent their emotions. The parade meandered wherever the vanguard chose to go, and wherever it went it was swelled by men, women and children who joined the happy horde. When it finally spent itself, a tired but happy Paul returned home and related to his family all the events of that day.

Chapter VI

The Good Life

At the conclusion of the war, America entered a decade of pleasure and prosperity heretofore unknown. Radio came into being, automobiles became the common mode of transportation, jobs were plentiful, and prohibition was the law of the land.

The war had awakened America's sleeping industrial giant and it was spewing out all sorts of wonders to make life easier and more enjoyable — electricity for homes, central heating by gas or oil, gas and electric stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. Life was easier and there was the time and means to enjoy it.

Paul and the nation had much in common. Both had matured: Paul at 39, and the nation as it neared its 150th anniversary. Both had succeeded against formidable odds and by sheer will and determination had maintained their independence. Now they were ready to relax and enjoy themselves; naive, unsophisticated, and still to be tested by the harsh realities of adversity that would be upon them in a scant ten years.

Once again vaudevillians were in demand, bookings were plentiful, and Bamberger's piano department was doing a thriving business. Janet was now part of the act, and the Meinert's parlor between rehearsals and guests was a constant beehive of activity. The 1920s were the happiest and most rewarding years of Paul's life. He no longer had to prove himself. He was a much sought after entertainer; his family was well provided for and he was surrounded by a loving family who worked and played together.

The musical Meinerts flourished during the 1920s. Janet

was prominently featured on stage and in the advertising, but the act was always built around Paul's talents. He was a musician, a vocalist, a monologist, and a mimic. His monologues were humorous and like his comic songs featured the broken dialect of an Irish, Italian, German or Jewish person. Nobody took offense at this type of humor. There were no complaints of ethnic slurs. People laughed at themselves and more often than not called for recitations on their own ethnic background.

Paul's monologues contained no slurs. They did, however, rely heavily upon the broken English of a specific nationality to create the humor. There was the old Italian man narrating, "George de Washaton", the story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree; the excited German describing the bicycle race at the Velodrome with the guttural comments coming faster and faster as the pace of the race quickens; and, "Cohen on the Telephone", relaying instructions to his tailorshop clerk on how to make a sale.

His comic songs quite often poked fun at the various nationalities, but never in a derogatory way. He had one ditty entitled, "The Argentines, the Portuguese, and the Greeks", which was quite popular. It was a catchy refrain that teased the three nationalities about being landlords of tenement houses inhabited by the Irish and the Jews. The only one of his ditties for which the words can be recalled in their entirety is "The Gooseberry Tree", a favorite of his granddaughters. The lyrics were:

An Irishman, a Dutchman and a Hebrew
 Were sentenced for murder of the third degree.
 There were no gallows so the Judge consented
 To hang each one upon their favorite tree.
 And when the time arrived for execution
 The Irishman was the first one to be tried.
 For his gallows Murphy chose an oak tree.
 So way up on the oak tree Murphy died.
 The Dutchman said, "Any old tree
 For to hang on will satisfy me".
 But when Mosie was asked what tree he loved best,

He insisted a gooseberry tree
 But the judge he said, "Mosie, you know
 That a gooseberry tree is too low".
 "I know that", said Mose, "but I'll wait till it grows
 But I'll hang on a gooseberry tree".

One of the Newark newspapers in covering the news of a special meeting of Rahwah Lodge No. 1075 B.P.O.E. in 1924, reported:

"The principal entertainer of the evening was Sylvester Meinert, a professional monologist and mimic artist, who kept the company for twenty minutes or more convulsed with laughter".

The monologue, Cohen on the Telephone, involved a telephone conversation between Cohen and his salesman. At one point after the salesman told Cohen that the customer wanted a blue suit and none fit him, Cohen advised him, "So, he *wants* a blue suit? Put a blue bulb in de light socket".

Paul was a lot like Cohen; he did his best to give the customers what they wanted. If it was strictly laughter, he had his monologues and comic songs. If a vocalist was needed, he sang. If classical, popular or ethnic music was desired, he could provide it. He entertained at many private parties. At Mr. Louis Bamberger's parties he entertained in a tuxedo. For hayrides, he wore a farmer's outfit. For Monte Carlo Night at the Essex County Country Club, it was cowboy boots, a ten gallon hat, and a gambler's jacket. Paul could not get a Monte Carlo gambler's outfit, so he "put a blue bulb in the socket" and made everybody happy.

The Musical Meinerts' act however was always built around his musical talents. The instruments that he played included the piano, xylophone, a full sized chromatic and a four-note harmonica, both metal and bamboo chimes, violin, cello, guitar, saxophone, flute, and drums. The musical novelties included the cathedral bells, musical saw, kazoo, flexetone, spoons, bottles, glasses, one string violin, one string horn, one string coconut shell, hose, and the balloon.

His rendition of the "Spirit of Independence" on the violin was an audience favorite. In the beginning, the violin was held under his chin in the normal position for a violinist. Before the number was finished, he played a few bars with the violin placed on top of his head, then with it tucked under his arm in somewhat the same position that one might hold a child under an arm, followed by the violin held with its back to the back of his right knee and then his left knee, and finally held as one would hold a cello with the bottom of the violin touching the floor and its fingerboard pointing toward the ceiling.

The musical novelties always intrigued the audiences. The cathedral bells were hand-held bells. Each contained its own distinctive note. They were arranged on a stand in a manner similar to a piano keyboard. By picking up and ringing specific bells individually or in unison, melodic tones were created.

The musical saw is played with a violin bow or by striking it with a wooden mallet. Paul sat in a chair bracing the handle of the saw between his knees. He held the tip of the saw with one hand and flexed the blade as he pulled the violin bow across the back edge of the blade. This created a vibrating tone, and the degree to which the blade was flexed determined the specific tone. Melodies, such as "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life", were played by constantly flexing the blade to predetermined degrees of curvature, while stroking the saw with the bow or while striking it with a mallet.

The flexetone is based on the same principle, striking a curved metal sheet. It consists of a triangular frame with a handle attached to the apex of the triangle. Positioned inside the frame is a thin metal sheet slightly smaller but with the same shape as the frame itself. A steel wire with a wooden ball attached to its tip protrudes from each side of the handle. When the handle is shaken these wooden balls strike the metal sheet, creating a tone. It is played by grasping the handle with four fingers, allowing the thumb to be free to press against the apex of the metal sheet. As the flexetone is shaken the metal sheet is pressed, or curved, to the degrees necessary to create the desired tones.

The one-string violin, the one-string horn, and the coconut shell were all novelties conceived by Paul in the 1920s. The one-string violin was nothing more than a common cigar box to which was attached a long fingerboard with one violin string. The coconut shell was basically the same except a half of a coconut shell was used in place of the cigar box. The one-string horn, which Paul often called a cello-phone, was an oddly shaped piece of wood that had the appearance of a canoe paddle with a metal horn affixed to the side of its blade. One cello string affixed to the bottom of the paddle ran up through the base of the horn to the tip of the paddle.

All were played with a violin bow in the same manner as a violin. The fact that they were limited to one string was offset to some degree by their elongated fingerboards. Songs that Paul played on these novelties included, *Now That You're Gone*, *Guilty*, *Crinoline Days*, and *Smiling Through*.

The balloon worked on the same principle as the rubber hose. After it was inflated Paul held it on his lap with his fingers holding the neck of the balloon and his arms pressing the sides. By creating a constant pressure on the balloon with his arms while stretching and squeezing its neck, he produced tunes such as, *East Side West Side*, and *Roll on Mississippi*.

The spoons were ordinary tablespoons. They were held by their handles between the fingers of one hand so that the base of each spoon was opposite the other and only slightly apart. By striking the base of the spoons together, a rhythmic sound was created not unlike the sound of castanets. They were tapped against the palm of the hand, a table, or any object. Paul used his arm or legs, striking the spoons as he worked them quickly up and down his arm and legs. Dexterity was required however to create, maintain, and diversify the cadence.

Paul used a kazoo occasionally in his small act. The kazoo is a small metal object shaped somewhat like a submarine. Approximately six inches long it has a small opening at one end and a larger opening at the other end. In the middle, on the top, is a small turret containing a paper seal. It creates a

sort of raspy melodic sound when you place your mouth over one end of the kazoo and hum a melody.

In 1920 Paul and Louise contracted to perform regularly on Sundays at the Greisenheim, a luxurious home for elderly people of means. Its lovely gardens and splendid restaurant were open to the guests of the residents. On Sundays it was heavily patronized by children and grandchildren of the Greisenheim residents, gathering for family get-togethers.

That was the only time in the 1920s that the Musical Meiners committed themselves for an extended period of time, preferring to limit themselves to single bookings. On numerous occasions they accepted two or three different bookings for the same night, necessitating careful planning with their booking agents. It required their being spotted first on one bill, last or near last on the other bill, and if there were a third, it had to be one of the middle acts.

Entertainers were in demand for vaudeville nights, banquets, dances, political events, smokers, and private parties. Paul worked political rallies and smokers only as a single act. Organizations that sponsored affairs providing entertainment included churches, fraternal organizations, social clubs, political clubs, and trade unions. Paul entertained for all of these groups, for private family parties held in homes or public halls, and for commercial establishments that provided entertainment on New Year's Eve and other special occasions.

He often entertained at political rallies and created words for a campaign song that could be used for any candidate for any office. The lyrics were fitted to a tune titled, "Winter", and all the words were fixed except for the candidate's name and the office he was running for. Assuming the candidate's name was Ziegler and he was running for president of the city council, the lyrics would have been:

Ziegler, Ziegler, everybody vote for Ziegler.
 He's the man we boom, give him lots of room.
 Every member just remember, we'll elect him in November.
 Ziegler, Ziegler, when the snow begins afalling
 By the fireside so bright, we'll read on election night
 The president of the city Council's Ziegler."

Paul accepted bookings for any and all political rallies, Republican or Democrat, and the same song was used, with only the name and office changed to suit the particular rally he attended. Paul lived and worked in a far less sophisticated era in which he and his campaign songs were very much in demand during the weeks preceding elections.

Paul was a fun-loving man, but entertaining to him was a serious business. He believed that one owed it to his audience to be musically and phonetically perfect, and this was reflected in his rehearsals. They were generally of long duration and constant repetition until he was satisfied. Normally a mild gentle man, Paul, when rehearsing, became a stern taskmaster whose patience was quickly exhausted whenever the performances of Louise or Janet did not come up to his expectations.

Whenever Paul played an instrument that was supported with a piano accompaniment, Louise was his accompanist. Most of his numbers were so supported, and they spent numerous hours rehearsing. Janet, too, was involved but to a far lesser degree. To a small child it seemed as if those rehearsals were never-ending, and it was even more so when Paul was dissatisfied with her performance.

His patience was very limited. When what Janet enunciated or sang did not meet his standards, Paul stopped and explained how it was to be done. Thereafter he expected it to be done as he had described it. If she failed to do it correctly on the next try, he would stop and explain once more. That, however, was generally the extent of his patience. If Janet failed again, his hands would pound down on the piano keys generating a thundering discordance, the prelude to the verbal venting of his displeasure.

By the time Janet was nine Paul had trained her to sing songs in German, Polish, and Italian. The melodies were very easy, but the lyrics were difficult and meaningless to her. She neither spoke nor understood the languages. Paul nevertheless expected her to enunciate each word properly. He constantly stressed that it was the native tongue of many people in the audience. If they sang in the audience's native

tongue, as entertainers it was their duty to enunciate the words as the audience would.

With that philosophy rehearsals were turbulent when Janet was learning foreign language songs. She often wanted to cry but wouldn't for fear Paul would no longer allow her to perform. Knowing this was the severest punishment she could conceive of, Paul never hesitated to suggest it in order to get her to persevere.

Paul had an expression he used quite often when dissatisfied with Janet's singing. Mildred, who by then was well in her teens, was leaving the house one day as Paul once more used that expression, "You sound like a Sunday school kid!" As she opened the front door to leave, Mildred turned and called out, "Well, that's what she really is", and then dashed out the door. She was sure her retort had irritated her father and retaliation would be forthcoming. After a moment of silence however Paul chuckled as he commented to himself, "Son of a gun, she's right!"

Whenever Louise was in the room Paul showed more restraint. This stemmed from an incident that occurred years ago when Paul and Louise were rehearsing. Louise was having difficulty with a particular musical passage and Paul's increasing annoyance compounded her difficulty and hampered her ability to concentrate on the problem. Finally, his impatience got the best of him and he slammed his violin bow down on Louise's head, accidentally or by design, with enough force to break the bow. Louise promptly stood up and caustically announced, "That is the end of rehearsing", walked out into the kitchen and shut the door behind her.

After a period of time Paul went into the kitchen and apologized, saying he was wrong and his nerves got the best of him. "All right", Louise coldly replied, "I'll accept the apology but if it ever happens again you can take the act and do it by yourself!" It never happened again.

Selecting new songs or numbers for the act was a never ending task. Periodically, Louise and Janet went into New York City and made the rounds of the music publishers. The publishers relied heavily upon professional entertainers to give their music the public exposure needed to make it a hit.

They were always welcomed by the publishers and given professional copies of the publishers' latest numbers. These copies were strictly words and music on plain paper, lacking the fancy cover or the promotional material normally contained on the back pages of regular copies.

Trips to the music publishers were a full day's activity. They arrived in the city early in the morning and usually would not finish up until around 4:00 pm. Louise made an effort to cover every known publisher and to seek out any new ones. After each trip Paul and Louise reviewed the tunes she had collected. Louise would sit at the piano and start to play each number. If they did not care for a particular tune, it was set aside. If Paul liked both the tune and the lyrics and decided to sing the song, the sheet music was placed in a folder until he had time to record the lyrics in New York Point. When the lyrics did not appeal to him but the tune did, the discussion centered around which instrument would best enhance the melody. After the decision was made, each tune was classified accordingly.

Initial rehearsals for these numbers were entirely different from normal rehearsals. Paul had to learn the melodies. Louise could have read aloud the notes and Paul could have recorded them in New York Point, but he preferred to mentally absorb each melody. Louise would play the number several times and then Paul would attempt to play it. He usually picked it up promptly, but occasionally it was necessary to repeat the process several times.

When Pittsburgh's Radio Station KDKA went on the air in 1920, it heralded the beginning of a new entertainment era. By January 1922 there were thirty-six stations broadcasting, and by December 1922 it had expanded to five hundred and seventy-six stations. Broadcasting was in its infancy and in need of a special type of talent; they were looking for entertainers whose acts when heard but not seen could captivate audiences.

One of the pioneers of radio was Station WOR which first broadcast on February 22, 1922. It was owned and operated by the Bamberger Broadcasting Company, and its studio was located in Bamberger's Department Store, not too far

from the music department. Paul's talents were known throughout the store, and he was often called upon to fill in when there were gaps in the station's programming; and it was not long before he was broadcasting regularly.

Fan mail, mailed to WOR in October and November of 1922, reveals that Paul was including his monologues, comic songs, and impersonations in his broadcasts at that time. In one of his broadcasts he did an imitation of a railroad train. This was the very early days of radio before the sound effects men had perfected their skills. A Mr. P. O'Brien of the Bronx wrote in to say, "Your imitation of a locomotive at 3:00 am was fine. I think I am something of an authority on railroad whistles at that hour. Your voice carried me back a long time ago when I was a night telegraph operator on railroads". A Mr. C. Newbourg of Brooklyn wrote, "Mr. Paul Meinert's imitation of a railroad locomotive came through so realistic that I instinctively stepped to one side, off the track".

Other fan mail made references to his monologues, "Cohen on the Telephone" and "War in Snyder's Grocery Store"; also to his comic songs, "The Chicken Walk March" and "I Go So Far With Sophie on Sophie's Sofa and Sophie Goes So Far With Me".

At the end of 1922 Paul teamed up with his old schoolmate Teddy Schrader to do the Teddy and Paul Show over another Newark station, WAAM. Paul's locomotive imitation was used to open and close the show. Initially, the train whistle was heard in the distance. It gradually got louder until it pulled into the station and stopped. When the train sound got close the announcer broke in with, "Here come Teddy and Paul!" The act ended with the train pulling out of the station and gradually fading in the distance. Teddy played the piano and Paul sang or played various other instruments.

When negotiating their contract there was one stipulation they insisted upon. It provided that there would be no mention of the fact that Paul and Teddy were blind. Paul had a strong conviction that an entertainer should be accepted solely upon his abilities. Sentiment or pity should never in any way influence the acceptance of a performer. The sta-

tion honored the request. No mention was ever made on the air or in their publicity of the fact they were blind.

The time came when the stipulation was such an accepted fact that it was no longer thought of until a new announcer, unaware of the stipulation, made mention of their blindness over the air. Paul was furious. The contract was completed, but after that Paul no longer would perform for the station nor continue with the Teddy and Paul program on any station.

This strong conviction that there should be no room for compassion in evaluating a performer did not reflect itself in Paul's compassion for those he considered less fortunate than himself. Paul and Louise gave generously of themselves entertaining not only shut-ins but also immigrants temporarily sheltered on Ellis Island. There were many benefit performances at places such as the Ivy Hill Alms House, Bonnie Brae Home for Boys, Home of the Friendless, Overbrook and Greystone Mental Institutions, and the Lyons Veterans Hospital. They never accepted a paid booking for Christmas Eve or Day, but often entertained groups of shut-ins on Christmas afternoons.

One summer day while approaching the entrance of the Lyons Veterans Hospital, Louise mentioned to Paul that there were groups of patients confined on heavily barred porches. Paul asked about these patients and was told that they were highly disturbed, often violent people who had to be confined. When he discovered that they could not attend the performance, he asked permission to go out on the lawn to do a highly condensed version of the show for them. There was some concern among the doctors that it might upset the patients. When it was suggested that the music might relax them, the doctors decided to experiment.

While Paul and Louise were in the process of setting up the instruments directly below the porches, the patients moved about in a highly excitable and noisy fashion. Once Paul began to play however their moods changed. Gradually, all sat or stood silently listening to the music, and this mood continued throughout the performance. Thereafter, whenever the Musical Meinerts returned to Lyons they performed for this very special audience.

Paul's compassion was for all who for reasons beyond their control could not help themselves. He had no use however for people who used their handicap to prevail on others to help them. He was particularly incensed with blind beggars, and this created some embarrassing moments for Louise. Paul never allowed his family to hold his arm and guide him when walking along the street. They could only caution him of an obstruction in his path and suggest he move to the right or left. At first when they saw blind beggars in his path they cautioned him, telling him what was ahead. They quickly learned not to tell him it was a blind beggar. Each time they did, he asked to be told when they were actually passing the beggar, and as they passed he growled, "Get a job, you lazy bum!"

Paul could never conceive of a blind person not being able to support himself if he really wanted to. All of his classmates and his associates at The Lighthouse for the Blind managed without resorting to begging. Some of them barely eked out a living, while others were quite successful. All did it with dignity, and Paul knew there were organizations ready and willing to assist blind people in generating or supplementing their income.

He could not conceive of anyone not trying to be self-sufficient. Often, when his children said, "I can't", he admonished them with, "You say you can not, but what you really mean is you will not". He knew from experience that achievement stemmed from trying, persistently trying, and achievement brought success and satisfaction.

Paul's success as an entertainer and family provider was obvious to all. His satisfaction was reflected in his walk, still with that peculiar strut acquired in childhood, arms swinging like a runner, shoulders pushed back and stomach protruding slightly forward. He strutted with just enough self-assurance and authority to create the appearance that he knew and saw where he was going. By now he had developed a fantastic capability to memorize and recall physical layouts of places he visited. Whenever he went to an unfamiliar place, one of the family walked him around the area explaining the location of the furniture and other objects.

After that he moved about by himself. Initially, until he satisfied himself that he had properly visualized the area, he did so with caution. Thereafter, he moved about in that cocky manner that seemed to say, "I can see where I am going".

Deep sea fishing was but one of Paul's many pleasures made possible by his willingness to try. He was an avid salt water fisherman who loved to go out on the party boats that worked out of the Barnegat Bay ports along the Jersey coastline. These were power boats of various sizes that could take sixty or more fishermen, depending upon the size of the boat. The fishermen selected positions along either side or along the stern of the boat. Paul always chose a spot at midship where the seats were close enough to the railing to permit one to fish while sitting.

With his tackle box and a bucket of bait close by at his feet, he was ready for a day's outing. He could change fishing tackle, bait the hook, and remove fish from his line without assistance. When the boat was crowded, the lines of fishermen often entangled. When this occurred, one fisherman had to hold his pole still while the other untangled the lines. When it happened to Paul, he patiently held his pole and let the other fisherman do the untangling. No one needed to know he was sightless.

When he was young the wooden reels did not have a drag or braking feature. The fisherman's thumb pressure on the spinning reel created the drag. If not done properly the reel continued to spin after the line hit the water, spinning off additional yards of line which quickly snarled and entangled with the rod and reel. Whenever this happened Paul had to rely on his fishing partners.

When Ben Glassen, one of Paul's closest friends, was a member of the fishing party he always assisted Paul. On one such trip, the rough sea had the fishermen concentrating more on keeping their balance than controlling their reels, and snarled lines were common. Paul was no exception. While unraveling Paul's line for the fourth time, Ben said, "Good God, Paul, it's rough out here today. I can see the swells coming and still have difficulty keeping my balance.

How do you manage?"

"Oh, I can feel them. I just hang on and ride them out".

"I admire you, Paul. I couldn't cope with it. I can't think of a worst fate than being blind".

"Oh no, Ben!" Paul quickly replied, "the worst is not being blind, it's not being able to reason".

When metal reels with the drag feature became available, Paul quickly acquired one. It substantially reduced, but never eliminated, those frustrating snarls. On occasions when it occurred late in the day, rather than bother his fishing partner, Paul packed up for the day and brought the line home for Janet to unravel. After each trip, Louise asked him what he caught. When his answer included, "... and I've got something for Sputz", Janet got the message — his fishing line was snarled.

Paul's mannerisms suggested he neither wanted nor needed assistance. Whenever it was offered, it was tactfully refused. Such was the case when the president of a local chapter of the Lyon's Club presented Paul with a white cane. The Musical Meinerts had been hired to entertain at one of the club's affairs. The Lyon's Club actively assisted the blind in many ways, one of which has been the gift of white canes. It was not therefore a surprise to Louise when she saw the club's president enter with a white cane in his hand. After complimenting them on their performance, he handed Paul the cane saying, "Here, Mr. Meinert, what do you think of this?" Paul took the cane, felt it from top to bottom and then handed it back, saying, "Now that is a beautifully constructed cane. I hope you find someone who needs it". The president, quick to grasp his meaning, smiled, winked to Louise, and accepted the return of the cane.

Paul's confidence in himself was now supreme. The 1920s were a decade of accomplishment. He tried his hand at making wine, raising pets, conducting an orchestra composed of blind musicians, designed packing cases for his instruments, bought a car, purchased property on which he later planned to have a house built, and learned how to play games such as Jacks and Casino.

Prohibition was in effect and it was illegal to buy or sell

alcoholic beverages, but the law did not prohibit one from making wine and liquor for his own consumption. Paul decided to make his own wine. He acquired all the necessary paraphernalia: the wine press, capper, bottles, corks, and ingredients; and the annual making of the wine developed into a ritual. There was the making of the wine, the meticulous storing of the bottles, the periodic inspections, taste testing and checks for sediment, all done with a flourish. Finally came the time when the wine was judged to be ready and Paul drank it with pride. Each year he safely proclaimed that year's batch, "the best yet", knowing neither Louise nor the girls would contest it. He was the only wine drinker among them.

Flushed with success as a wine maker Paul decided to devise a sectionalized packing case for his instruments, designed to assure the safety of even the most delicate items, the glasses and bottles. After completing the specifications he arranged to have the case built by Mr. Stanyeski. When it was delivered Paul promptly packed the instruments into the case. All fit perfectly, and Paul for a brief moment was pleased with his creation. Then he tried to move the case only to discover it was too heavy to move. Quick to see the humor of it, he laughingly observed, "What a dumbkopf? I never thought about weight". Fortunately, Mr. Stanyeski found a way to disassemble the case and rebuild it into two usable ones.

Paul was far more successful in raising canaries. Ostensibly he raised them to sell, but seldom sold any. When he did it was to appease Louise who was concerned with their ever increasing population. He periodically checked the buyers to determine how his birds were doing. On two such occasions he found the buyers had lost interest in their birds and were planning to dispose of them. In both cases Paul refunded the selling price and took the birds back for fear "his" birds would not find a happy home.

Paul spent endless hours cleaning cages, filling water and seed cups, breeding the birds, and just listening to them sing. There were several cages on stands placed about the house to display his favorite singers. The slightest indication of an

interest in canaries and Paul was ready to show off each and every bird, give its name and relate its life history.

Even more special was Chetta their little toy poodle. She was Paul's pride and joy. In 1928 old age took its toll; Chetta was dying. There was nothing that could be done to prolong her life. From her convulsions it was obvious that her death was imminent, and Paul insisted upon remaining with her until she died. He wanted her to know she was not alone. The next day he sadly took Chetta to a friend's farm and together they buried her in a secluded shady section of the farm.

It was Zeblo's farm located at the foot of Watchung Mountains in Scotch Plains, a place Paul loved to visit and where they were always welcomed. It was about an hour's drive from their home and ideally suited for the large picnics that Louise and Paul often arranged.

A piano was loaded on a moving van and driven to the picnic. Paul, when he wasn't eating, was up on the van at the piano. There were sing-a-longs, polkas for dancing, plus his inimitable entertainment which injected the picnickers' names into his songs and recitations. The men played games, the women chatted, and the children made their own fun wading in the stream, playing in the fields, picking the wildflowers or petting the animals.

The 1920s were the era of the big Meinert parties. Louise enjoyed preparing and cooking for parties of all sorts, such as picnics, house parties, and large gala affairs. All that was needed was an excuse for a party. Janet's graduation from grammar school was a sufficient reason. A hall was hired for the occasion. Most of Janet's classmates and many of Paul and Louise's friends and relatives were invited. The fact that the adults outnumbered the children was of little importance. Some relatives were alerted to bring their musical instruments, and Paul organized a band. There were games, dancing, dancing and singing contests, an abundance of food and soda; and, for Janet, Paul and Louise's gift, a diamond ring.

With Louise's flair for cooking and Paul's penchant for entertaining, dinner parties were commonplace. There were the occasional large dinner parties such as the ones for

Congressman McNulty and the members of the Newark Bears Baseball Team. More often, there were smaller informal dinner parties for close friends and relatives.

Because the parlor was their rehearsal hall, more often than not one or more instruments would be in the parlor when the guests arrived. Inevitably, someone anxious to get the entertainment started would ask: what had been added to the act, what new songs they had learned, did they know such-and-such a song, or just, "How about playing something?" Paul was always quick to oblige. After Paul, Louise and Janet entertained for awhile, Paul would encourage the guests to join the fun. He started group singing, encouraged anyone who could play one of his instruments to join him in a duet, and often coaxed guests to try his bells or chimes.

Christmas was one giant week long party, starting with a dozen or more guests on Christmas Eve. Each year the guest list included a few of Paul's co-workers who otherwise would have been alone on Christmas Eve. Paul insisted that they come and always made sure that there was a gift under the tree for them.

The Christmas Day dinner, a festive affair shared with family and a few close friends, was scheduled so as not to interfere with whatever plans they had to entertain shut-ins. For the balance of the week up until New Year's Eve it was Open House with friends and relatives dropping in nightly.

Christmas was Paul's favorite holiday. Preparations started weeks in advance with the selection of the Christmas tree. Louise always selected the tree, but it was never purchased until Paul checked and approved it. After first feeling needles for freshness, he determined the height and then checked the shape and fullness by spreading his arms around the branches at the base of the tree and slowly moving his arms up the tree until he reached the treetop.

A week before Christmas the parlor was closed off, and the girls were not permitted to go in. The tree was set up and gradually decorated as time permitted. The bulk of the tree trimming, of necessity, was done by Louise, but Paul always strung the lights and hung a few of the ornaments. Prior to their house being wired for electricity, Paul was extremely

proud of the lights. The power source was a rented car battery with a second battery to carry them through the holidays. Even then, the lights could only be on for limited periods of time.

Paul was like a little kid. He hinted about what he was giving and questioned the sizes, shapes and weights of the gifts given him; and he always emphasized the plural when asking about these gifts. One year Paul guessed what Janet was giving him but would not tell her. "If I told you now and it was right it would spoil the fun of the giving". In response to her constant urging, he offered to write it on a piece of paper and show it to her after he received his gift. This he did, and he was right. It was a canary.

Paul loved to tell the children about Santa Claus and made up far fetched stories about Saint Nicholas. Working in Bamberger's Department Store and being friendly with the man who perennially played Santa Claus made it possible for him to make Santa more plausible. Paul always alerted his friend when Janet was making her annual visit to Santa Claus, and together they plotted the scenario. When Janet came up to Santa, he greeted her by name and commented on the good and bad things she had done and something relating to one of her father's far fetched stories.

Christmas Eve was a ritual. Even as grown girls Janet and Mildred were not permitted to see the Christmas tree until the designated moment for the festivities to start. The signal was always the same — Paul playing Jingle Bells at the piano and calling out, "Goodbye, Santa Claus...Goodbye", followed by a "Ho, Ho, Ho", which faded off into the distance. The portiers, in later years the door, flung open and there stood the Christmas tree ablaze with lights and surrounded with gifts. The girls stood for a moment awe-struck by the beauty of the scene, but it was quickly dispelled as their eyes beheld the gifts beneath the tree. There was a mad dash to the tree. Joy and excitement abounded as toys were discovered and gifts unwrapped.

Mildred, Louise and Janet were quickly down on the floor extracting gifts from beneath the tree, handing them to the person whose name appeared on the gift tags. Gift packages

were opened, admired and temporarily set aside to discover what the next package contained. The parlor floor was quickly littered with torn gift wrappings, and toys and opened gifts were strewn about the room.

Until the bedlam subsided Paul sat glued in a chair with all his unwrapped gifts piled up on his lap. He dared not move from the chair for fear of stepping on toys and gifts. His gifts were not opened until the excitement subsided and everybody was ready to watch him. With all eyes upon him, he selected a package, felt it for size and weight, made silly guesses as to what it might be, had someone read the gift tag and then opened the gift. He made such a major production out of it that the girls always accused him of hogging the spotlight. The real reason escaped them. He wanted to know and thus to thank the donor of each gift.

With the opening of the last present, Paul's confinement to the chair ended. The room was quickly put back in order. Louise went to the kitchen to prepare for supper, Paul headed for the piano, and everybody sang Christmas carols until Louise called out, "Supper's ready". Those suppers were a delight to behold and a joy to eat. The table, festively decorated for the occasion, featured Louise's four salads — German potato, shrimp, chicken, and macaroni. Other appetizing tempters included deviled eggs, herring in sour cream, baked beans, knockwurst, a baked ham, an assortment of German bolognas made by a local butcher, a variety of cheeses, several types of bread, a large German stollen, and special German cookies called Fast Nacht Kuchen. It was long after midnight before the last guest departed and the family gathered around the Christmas tree to relax and to share with each other the joy and the pleasure of their Christmas Eve.

During the Yule season Paul was an overgrown kid. He always bemoaned the fact that he was born two days following Christmas. Somehow he felt cheated. Birthday gifts two days following Christmas gifts seemed less impressive. Moreover, there was always the possibility of a combination Christmas-Birthday gift. It had happened many times when he was a boy. The family knew how this annoyed him and

often hinted he was getting one big gift for both occasions. "None of that", he would quickly reply. "Make it two little gifts but give me one for each occasion! You get separate birthday gifts, why shouldn't I?" It was all done in fun, but Paul wasn't kidding.

Easter also had its ritual. Easter Saturday everybody, including Paul, colored hard boiled eggs. Each selected one particular egg which they identified as his or her "Dippy Egg". It was chosen because its shell was believed to be harder and it presumably contained a smaller air pocket. On Easter Morning it would emerge the Champion Egg.

As the family sat around the breakfast table on Easter Morning the game of Dippy started. It was played by holding the egg in your hand with only the pointed end of the egg visible. The object of the game was to tap the egg against the opponent's egg. The one whose eggshell cracked was the loser. The eggs were reversed in the hand so that only the blunt ends were visible. The opponent had to tap the other egg. The Champion Egg was the one still uncracked after challenging all opponents.

Paul was good at the game. He knew the knack of holding the egg when it was being struck and when it was doing the striking. He tapped the egg against his tooth to test it for strength. Nobody knew for sure if it was an act or if he really could judge an egg by the sound it made when striking his tooth. Act or no act, he usually wound up with the Champion Egg, and the girls decided something had to be done about it. The solution was Louise's darning egg, a solid mass of porcelain-like material in the size and shape of an egg, used as a support when mending stockings. They had found the egg that would not break — the champion of champions. Paul would never again have a winner.

Paul lost that Easter and would have continued to lose for years to come if the girls had not been so pleased with themselves. Flushed with success they challenged him over and over again, allowing him to use other eggs. Finally he became suspicious and asked to see the Champion Egg. All attempts to avoid showing the egg were to no avail. He insisted, and their hoax was uncovered.

"Son of a gun!" he chuckled. "I've been hood-winked!" Never again were they able to sneak the darning egg into the game. They often tried but Paul always held egg inspection before playing.

Teasing was common in the Meinert household, but it was always lighthearted and fun-provoking. The sight of Paul's wallet was the signal to tease him. When Paul opened his wallet the girls usually clapped their hands together pretending to a "kill a moth" that had just escaped from it. When Louise first did it Paul was confused and questioned what she was doing. "I'm trying to kill the moths you just let out of your wallet", Louise informed him. He chuckled and denied the possibility of moths ever flying out of his wallet. "You're right", Mildred chirped, "no moths could fly out of your wallet. They all died of suffocation a long time ago!"

Paul did not have many occasions to use his wallet because Louise was keeper of the funds. However, when there was a lull in the conversation he often took out the wallet and started counting his money. This usually started the teasing that moths were escaping: he was a tightwad, the wallet wasn't used to the sight of daylight, or it still contained the first dollar he ever earned. Knowing only too well that he started counting his money to instigate the teasing, occasionally they teased him more by ignoring him. When they did this he would stop counting, focus his good eye on them for a moment, and then start counting his money again. If there was no reaction, he would do it again and again until he got a reaction.

The opera was another source of teasing. Paul loved opera but was unable to instill the appreciation of opera in Louise or the girls. He would never openly deride Louise for anything but often teased her for disliking the opera by commenting, "She has no couth!"

Louise and Paul had once gone to the New York Metropolitan Opera House with a group of Bamberger employees. Paul had convinced her that she was in for a rewarding experience. Louise, however, did not enjoy it. Fortunately for her, the gentleman sitting on her right was with the group and shared her lack of appreciation of the opera. They wiled

away the time whispering about the occupants of the so-called "Diamond Horseshoe", deciding who came for the music, who because it was the thing to do, which jewels were real and which were fake, the cost of the dowagers' dresses, and the social prominence of the personages.

Paul did very little to discourage the whispering during the performance. When it was over he suggested to Louise that she would have gotten a lot more out of it if she had done more listening and less whispering. Louise quickly and emphatically assured him that this was not so and finalized her comment with, "If that's your idea of an evening out I'll drive you there and I'll drive you back home, but count me out!"

Paul was equally unsuccessful with Mildred. When at age ten he exposed her to the world of opera, she was just as bored as her mother had been, but she sat quietly through it. At the end of each act however she put on her coat, hopefully expecting to leave.

Janet was Paul's last hope. She, he knew, would share his love for the opera. *Carmen* was at the Mosque Theater when Paul decided Janet was old enough to attend. When he asked her to go, there was no hesitation. Paul explained that it was a story acted out by singers, and he arranged for Louise to get a copy of the libretto so that Janet could better understand the story. Having been on or around vaudeville stages since she was two, she visualized it as a form of vaudeville with the same type of music, ballads and comic songs. As Paul was soon to find out, she too had her mother's and sister's tastes, or, as Paul later put it, "Lack of good taste", for music.

By the time they reached the opera house Paul's enthusiastic comments had grown to a crescendo and convinced Janet that she was about to see an exciting show. She toyed with her mother's opera glasses as she eagerly waited for the curtain to rise. The opera had hardly begun and she was already bored with it. At first it did not bother her. She assumed, like vaudeville, it was the first act on the bill and the better acts would follow. She waited and waited for the next act, growing more impatient as time passed. All

attempts to query Paul about it elicited a prompt but gentle, "Shush!".

As the opera progressed Janet became more and more restless. Paul's "Shush", by now no longer gentle, was ultimately replaced by a whispered but stern, "Be quiet!", and with each succeeding "Be quiet!" his impatience became more obvious.

Towards the end of the final act she was trying to amuse herself and focused her opera glasses on a fat man in a toreador's costume. While she was trying to get a closer look at his silly hat, she caught a glimpse of his eyes — they crossed. The man was singing with gusto, and his facial expressions, including those eyes, gave meaning to every word he sang. The shrill laughter of a little girl resounded throughout the theater; the damage was done. From all around her came the audience's admonishments to be quiet — from all around her — that is, except from Paul. He just sat there, looking straight ahead, as if nothing had happened.

When the curtain finally came down and the lights went on, Paul stood up and without saying a word, strode out of the theater. Janet's call of, "Poppa, Poppa, wait for me!" went unheeded. After they were out of the theater and several blocks away, Paul broke his silence to deliver a severe tongue lashing for the embarrassment she had caused him.

That same childish sense of humor surfaced again when Paul was shopping for a new hat. For a giggly little girl, watching grownups try on hats was fun, and especially funny when it was her very own father.

Buying a hat was difficult for Paul. Not being able to see, there was no opportunity to judge the hat other than by feeling it and trying it on. That all hats are not made for all heads was self-evident, as Paul tried many hats. It was customary for men's hats to have a decorative feather protruding from the left side of the hatband, and Paul used the feather as a guide to properly place the hat on his head.

That day, Paul selected a hat which was an exception to the rule — the feather was at the back of the hat. As usual, he felt for the feather and placed the hat on his head with the feather on the left side. It looked utterly ridiculous and, what

made matters worse, he was completely unaware of it. Louise smiled and managed to contain herself, but not Janet. Paul had been tolerant and up to this point had ignored her giggling and snickering. When she burst into uncontrollable belly-laughs at sight of the Napoleonic hat, Paul's tolerance turned to rage. With the hat still on his head, he growled, "Out, and stay out until I'm finished!"

Janet was too full of laughter to recognize his annoyance. Even in his anger Paul looked funny. Louise, quick to appreciate both of their reactions, promptly escorted her outside and instructed her to wait by the door until they came out. Janet was now at the silly stage and every little thing seemed extraordinarily funny. She could not resist watching. As she peeked through the store's window with her hands cupped about her eyes, she made no effort to control her laughter. Her behavior quickly attracted curiosity seekers who stopped and peered into the store.

Louise waited several days before telling Paul about the crowd Janet had gathered. She wanted to be sure that he had calmed down enough to see the humor of the situation. For the first time, Paul was aware of how ridiculous he looked with the hat on sideways. He often joshed about how little it took to make them laugh, and as if to prove his point, left the room and returned with a hat on sideways. He saw the humor of that situation and made light of it, but never again allowed Janet to accompany him when he shopped for a hat.

Paul was usually quick to recognize the humor of any given situation and never hesitated to exploit it. So it was when he sought to purchase a saw for the act. Louise and Janet had seen a man at the Hippodrome playing a musical saw, and they were so impressed they could not wait to tell Paul about it. The idea intrigued him and he immediately began to experiment with an old saw. When satisfied that he could master the technique and convinced that a saw of better tempered steel would produce better tones, the family headed for the hardware store.

"I want a good saw", was Paul's greeting to the clerk.

"Yes, Sir", the clerk replied. "Do you want a crosscut or a rip saw?"

"It's not important as long as it's of high quality steel", responded Paul.

The clerk concluded that Paul was oblivious of the importance of the right saw for the right task, and he proceeded to explain the purposes of the crosscut and the rip saws. Paul, who was familiar with the use of rip and crosscut saws, could not resist the temptation. He patiently listened to the whole lecture and then said with tongue in cheek, "It makes no difference to me as long as it has a good tone. Let me see your best saw".

The clerk's face readily showed his dismay. He fumbled for a moment and then recomposed himself. He was not quite sure of Paul's sanity and decided the best thing to do was to humor him. He selected two saws and handed them to Paul who after slowly feeling them asked, "Do you have a chair I might use?" The clerk, now quite leery of Paul, hesitantly brought over an old chair, fully expecting Paul to test the saw on the chair. Instead, to the clerk's consternation, Paul nonchalantly sat on the chair, put the handle of the saw between his knees, pulled a small mallet from his pocket and kept striking the saw as he curved the blade of the saw with his other hand. He ultimately purchased a saw and left the store without any explanation. Once outside, he turned to Louise and laughingly announced, "Boy, did I shake him up! I'd sure like to hear him telling his version of that sale".

Just as interesting may have been the tales told about Paul by the ferryboat hucksters. In the mid-1920s the Meiners regularly drove to the Lighthouse in New York City where Paul directed and conducted an orchestra composed of blind people. To get there, they regularly crossed the Hudson River by ferryboat. Hucksters, who moved among the cars waiting to board the ferry, often claimed to be sailors broke and stranded in port, selling prized possessions from faraway places to raise needed cash.

Paul's love of people and inquisitive nature made him the ideal hucksters' pigeon. They poured out their life's story to a gullible Paul, and because they suddenly felt close to him they were ready to sell him whatever they happened to be peddling, at far less than they should. Fortunately, Louise

was always present and prevented most of the transactions. Occasionally however, she acquiesced if the price was not too far out of line. One such time he bought her a jade necklace for two dollars. The same necklace was on display at Woolworths for one dollar, but Woolworth did not call it jade.

The two major family purchases made in the early 1920s were the car and property in the Hiltonia section of Maplewood, New Jersey. The car opened up a whole new lifestyle for the family. It was a symbol of the good times that were the 1920s. The property, unbeknown to them, was to be the crutch that would carry them through the worst of the bad times that were coming.

The property was bought in 1920. Paul always planned to have a house built out in what then was the country. Trolley lines, passing within a few blocks of the property, ran to Newark. Getting to work, Paul explained, would be simple because one of the stops was in front of the Bamberger store. It was not the transportation that concerned Louise; it was the knowledge that Paul could not see to do the myriad of things that the average man had to do to maintain a house. To tell Paul the truth would be too cruel, so Louise agreed to the purchase knowing that she would have to continually find reasons to delay the building plans.

The Meinerts had always been a close knit family that did things as a group but Mildred was getting older and gradually drifting away from the group activities. At the beginning of the decade she was already working for the telephone company, and in her free time preferred the company of teenagers. In 1924 she married Eddie Smith and, once again, she and her husband became involved more and more in family activities.

In the home, family life centered around the kitchen table. It was many things ... a dining table, a workbench, a desk, and a recreational center. Most informal family dining was at that table. Louise used it to prepare meals, type correspondence and programs for the act, read aloud newspapers and books for Paul's benefit, sew, and quite often just sit and rest for a moment. It was Paul's workbench, Janet's desk for

doing homework, and a game or recreational table for the whole family. Those not preoccupied in some activity congregated around the table to watch, talk, or get involved in whatever was going on.

Paul's habit of getting involved brought about the discovery that he could produce simple tunes with a balloon. Louise was decorating for Janet's birthday party. When Paul insisted upon helping, Louise assigned him the task of blowing up the balloons. After blowing up one of the balloons it slipped out of his hands as he attempted to knot the neck. It quickly shot upwards and darted briefly around the room until all the air in the balloon was expelled. The varying sounds of the escaping air intrigued him. He selected and blew up another balloon. Holding the tip of the balloon's neck between his thumb and forefingers, he began manipulating his fingers in a manner that permitted air to escape through minute gaps at the tip of the neck. He quickly discovered that distinct tones could be created and tones varied depending upon the size of the gap. Afterwards came long hours of experimentation until he developed the technique of playing the scale and then creating simple tunes.

When Paul listened to the girls playing Jacks, he had to know what it was all about, and once it was explained to him he had to play. The girls taught him, and in time he played surprisingly well. The fact that he was sightless was of no great significance to them. He had always been sightless. In fact, they thought he had the advantage because of his big hands. The only concession they granted him was the right to feel the location of the Jacks before he made his play.

He also had to get involved when he heard Louise and the girls playing Casino. In Casino, a player never has more than four cards in his hand, but there can be a number of cards face up on the table. The object of the game is to capture the most cards and also to capture six special cards that have a specific point value. It is done by matching a card in a player's hand to one or more cards on the table.

Paul's left eye had improved slightly now that he was older. He could tell time by holding the face of his watch up close to his so-called good eye. When he discovered he could

read a playing card by holding it about one inch from his eye and slowly moving his eye up and down the card, he was determined to play.

With only four cards to read, Paul did not have much difficulty. When it was his turn to play, someone would tell him the values of the cards on the table. After studying his hand he would play whatever card he chose and announce which card or cards it captured. One of the other players would then pick up those cards and hand them to him. He seldom erred, but he was not above trying to capture a high value card with an incorrect card, knowing full well he would be caught and derided. He enjoyed instigating the banter and prolonged it by laughingly declaring his innocence.

Paul was not above getting other family members involved in his projects. Repairing piano actions was always a family project. An action, the mechanism in the piano that creates musical tones by striking steel wires, consists of a series of various sized and shaped wooden hammers that are activated by pressing the piano keys.

When a piano action was badly in need of repair Paul removed it from the piano and brought it home to work on because it was a very time consuming job. Hammers had to be repaired or replaced as did the felt coverings on the hammers. Paul made all the major repairs, but the Tom Sawyer in him always managed to get Louise and Janet involved in removing and replacing the felt pads. The first time he inveigled Janet to help him he was at the kitchen table half-humming and half-singing as he worked to repair the action.

"Hey, Sputz", he called, "take a look at what I'm doing. This is lots of fun". Sputz was Janet's nickname whenever Paul was in a jovial mood, so it was obvious he was having a good time. She had to investigate.

Step by step, he showed her what he was doing, always explaining why he was doing it, and injecting little innuendos suggesting how much more fun this was than crayoning, sewing doll dresses, etc. Needless to say, when he finally said, "Would you like to try it, Sputz?" she was eager to do it. Paul was patient and lavish with praise, and it was not long

before she found herself hoodwinked into wanting to do it regularly.

Endless hours were spent at the kitchen table while Louise was teaching Paul to write his name. It bothered Louise that he had to sign all legal documents with an X. The Institute for the Blind had taught him many things but never how to sign his own name. Louise told him how much this bothered her and offered to teach him to do it. He readily agreed and the lessons started. It did not come quickly, and had it not been for his strong desire to please Louise he would have scuttled the whole idea.

Paul could recite the alphabet, but his mental image of each letter was the series of raised dots it represented in New York Point. Now he had to picture in his mind the shape and form of each letter as sighted people see them. His legal name was Sylvester J. Meinert. To write his name he had to visualize eleven letters plus a dot.

Initially, Louise taught him to print the letters. She gave him his first mental picture of a letter by tracing the letter on the palm of his hand with her finger. She then placed a pencil in his hand and helped him print the letters by guiding his hand. This was repeated over and over until he could print the letter without assistance. When Paul was able to print all eleven letters, the task of printing his name began. He had difficulty with the proper spacing of letters, transcribing letters in a straight line, and containing the entire name within a limited area. It was a frustrating task, but Paul persevered.

Louise taught him to place his left hand on the paper with two extended fingers resting on the area in which the signature was to be placed. The fingers, slightly apart and parallel to the signature line, created a frame within which to place his signature. It revealed the amount of space available for the height of the letters and the path along which the letters were to be transcribed.

After Paul was able to print his name, Louise decided that he should and probably could write rather than print his name. The whole process started again, this time utilizing the shapes and forms of script letters, and in time he was

writing his name. The complete name was too difficult to write within the limited space provided for signatures, so he often settled for S. Meinert (as he did when he proudly signed his Social Security card in 1937).

Louise ultimately taught Paul the entire alphabet, and on one of those rare occasions when he was away from the family, he painstakingly printed a lovely letter and sent it to Louise. Knowing so well the hours of love and effort that went into writing the letter, Louise treasured it far more than any gift he had ever given her.

Louise was constantly searching for a medical breakthrough that would enable Paul to see. In the late 1920s she pressured him into being examined by a doctor who recommended some very unusual prescription glasses. They consisted of a quarter-inch thick clear plastic sheet in the shape of ordinary glasses. Instead of normal lenses, two separately controlled telescopic lenses were inserted into the heavy plastic frame. They projected out about one-quarter of an inch from the back side of the frame. They also projected out in front of the frame from one and an eighth to one and a half inches, depending upon the adjustment.

The glasses were deceivingly light in weight but nevertheless uncomfortable to wear for any long period of time. Paul was not impressed with the glasses but Louise prevailed upon him to purchase them. They were absolutely useless to him, but he nevertheless wore them around the house occasionally so that Louise wouldn't know how useless they were. However, in time it became obvious to her.

In 1922 Paul was struck by a car as he stepped off a trolley. The driver of the car sped away before he could be identified. As Paul stepped down and away from the trolley, the fender of the car spun him around and threw him to the ground, breaking his collarbone. Another driver, who had witnessed the accident, helped Paul into his car and drove him home. He assisted Paul into the house and sat him down on a kitchen chair. Upon hearing the commotion Louise rushed into the kitchen. At the sight of Paul bleeding, bruised and disheveled, she became distraught. He promptly tried to calm her down. "It's all right, Lou. Don't get excited, I've just

been hit by a car”.

“Hit by a car! What is the matter with you?” she screamed at the good samaritan. “What’s wrong with your vision? You shouldn’t be driving a car!” The man stood quietly as she ranted on and on, and Paul kept injecting, “But, Lou...but, Lou...”

Finally there was a pause and Paul blurted out, “Lou, this man didn’t hit me! He was kind enough to bring me home”.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped as she turned back to the gentleman, “I’m so sorry. May I get you a cup of coffee, cake, or something?”

“No”, he quietly replied, “but I would like to help you get your husband across the street to the hospital so they can attend to him”.

At the hospital it was revealed that Paul had broken his collarbone and would be in a cast for approximately ten weeks. The cast immobilized his right arm. He nevertheless reported to work each day and somehow managed to tune pianos with one hand. He could not entertain and it was impossible for him to practice. The long evenings of inactivity made him restless. The family, deeply concerned with his inability to cope with the enforced inactivity, could not wait for the collarbone to mend.

The family saw no humor in the incident on the night of the accident although they often chuckled about it later. The plight of their good samaritan amused them. They often wondered if he too saw the humor of it but dared not to smile for fear of further upsetting Louise.

The family, in retrospect, laughed at their own behavior. Louise and the girls often recalled with amusement the occasion when Paul stormed out of the house seriously intent on beating up a merchant who had been discourteous to Louise. After quieting him down, they conjured up a mental picture of what might have been — a picture of Paul trying to punch out somebody he could not see.

Paul was quick to react when anyone demeaned Louise. One election as Paul and Louise were entering a voting poll a young poll worker challenged them, “Only one voter in the booth at a time, Sir”.

"I am sightless". Paul explained, "My wife has always helped me".

"Sorry, Sir. I can't allow it", the poll worker pompously replied. "If you need help, a poll worker from each party will go in to assist you".

"Why not my wife?"

"It's for your protection, Sir — to make sure that the vote is cast in accordance with your wishes".

Paul was enraged. "No way will you go in! How do I know you can be trusted? My wife, I know, I can trust!"

Paul's tirade attracted the attention of senior voting officials — old friends of Paul. They promptly authorized Louise going into the booth and made the poll worker apologize for the inference that Louise might fraudulently mark the ballot.

On January 1, 1920, Paul raised his glass and toasted the New Year, "To the good life! May it never end". Unbeknownst to him, at age thirty-nine, he had entered a decade in which success and happiness would far exceed his expectations. The year 1920 ushered in the good life, but it was not destined to "never end".

For the next ten years however Paul was at the peak of his entertainment career. He was an active member of The Foresters, The Odd Fellows, The Camel Club, The Sportsmen's Fishing Club, Conrad Deichler's Association, The Professional Entertainers of New York, The National Vaudeville Association, and The New Jersey Piano Tuners Association. He organized and conducted The Lighthouse Serenaders, an orchestra composed of members of the New York Association for the Blind, and he crowded family outings and extended vacations into what leisure time he had.

The Jersey seacoast was a family favorite. Louise was satisfied to watch the surf and enjoy the sea breezes, while Janet and Paul engaged in more strenuous activities. Paul patiently helped her overcome her fear of the surf and with him at her side to go out beyond the breakers. He taught her how to fish from a rowboat, the art of catching crabs, and the way to spot and dig for littleneck clams.

They were constant companions at the seashore. He was

her teacher, always ready and able to answer questions concerning the ocean and the sea life it contained. She in turn was his eyes and his helper. It was her job to spot and show him the location of the geysers indicating the presence of littleneck clams under the sand. She guided him as he rowed the boat in the rivers and bays in which they fished and crabbed, and she netted his crabs after he brought them to the top of the water with a dropline. If he had chosen to use a crab trap he could have caught many more crabs and not needed her help, but he would never do this because he felt it was unsportsmanlike and unfair to the crabs.

Chapter VII

The Car

In 1922 Paul and Louise bought their first car. If ever an inanimate object was truly part of a family, that car was. It was a magic carpet whisking them to places near and far, a launching pad for impromptu excursions, and an air conditioner for hot and sultry nights.

It was Louise's idea to buy the car. She carefully planned her sales pitch. She knew Paul always tried to please her and do whatever she wanted, but this was a major investment. She had to convince him that they needed a car and that she could drive the car. Unbeknownst to Paul, Louise shopped for a car and a driving instructor. She made it clear to the salesman that the sale depended upon their teaching her to drive and helping her acquire a driver's license. Women drivers were a rarity in 1922 and many salesmen shied away from teaching one to drive. Undaunted, Louise persevered until she found the car she wanted and the salesman willing to teach her to drive.

Meanwhile, she kept a record of all their bookings together with the cost of taxicabs needed to get them to and from these engagements. She also kept records of all delays caused by taxis not arriving on schedule. Armed with all her facts and statistics, Louise was prepared for the hard sell.

"Paul, I've learned to drive a car and I think we should buy one".

To her surprise no facts or figures were needed to convince him. Paul promptly agreed. Always convinced that Louise accomplished anything she set her mind to, Paul had no doubt about her ability to drive.

On May 17, 1922, they purchased a Model T Ford Sedan

from the Morgan Motor Car Company of Newark, New Jersey. Considering the cost of living, cars were more costly in those days, and many of the current cars standard features were classified as extras.

Three of the four invoices covering the sale of the car still exist. The basic car was billed as follows:

1	Ford Sedan S&D Motor #5973430	\$645.00
	Freight, Gas and Oil	37.45
	War Tax	27.51
	Total	\$709.96

Billed on a separate invoice were the following extras:

1	Dashlight	\$2.00
1	Set Double Hassler Shock Absorbers	33.50
1	Front and Rear Bumper	26.00
1	Hugro Wheel	15.00
1	Speedometer	16.00
1	Dome Light	8.50
	Total	\$101.00

Still another invoice covering additional extras:

1	Interior Mirror (less fender mirror)	\$2.00
1	Door Lock	5.50
1	Trico Window Cleaner	2.00
1	Set of Pedal Pads	1.25
1	Hub Cap15
1	Basco Horn	5.00
	Total	\$15.90

The lost invoice covered the self-starter, the luggage carrier, and the cutglass flower vase. Hand cranks, the standard method for starting cars, were hard to use and there was always the danger of injuring yourself. The cranking process created considerable tension on the crank handle, and on occasion the handle would snap back or recoil with considerable force.

Louise could not crankup a car. While Paul had the strength to do it, Louise was concerned that he might injure himself. Moreover she foresaw times when she would be alone in the car, so a self-starter was added.

A luggage carrier was needed to acquire sufficient storage space to carry Paul's instruments. Cars did not have trunks or hardtop roofs on which luggage could be stored. Carriers were used in conjunction with cars' running boards. The running boards, extending from front to back fenders, were platforms used by passengers to step up into the car. The luggage carrier, looking like a metal fence extending along the outside edge of a running board, was clamped to each end of the board. The body of the car, the two fenders, and the carrier created an oblong type of well or box in which luggage was stored. Louise insisted upon a cutglass vase for the car. It was cone shaped and rested in a silver holder attached to the car post that separated the center and back windows. The vase usually contained fresh flowers and water to keep them fresh. The flowers were more often wildflowers or from the garden, but when they were not available Louise managed to find a flower vender or a florist.

The overall car cost was about a thousand dollars. The available invoices confirm that \$826.86 was billed by Morgan Motor Company. License plates for the first year cost \$9.20, and Eastern Casualty Underwriters' Company of Newark rendered an invoice for \$76.83 covering car and fire insurance, including "endorsement to cover any driver". These totaled \$912.89. The self-starter, luggage carrier and vase brought the grand total up around one thousand dollars.

Their car was displayed by the Morgan Motor Company at the Automobile Show in the Newark Armory. Mr. Morgan had made special arrangements with Louise to show the car and turn it over to her on the last day of the show. When that day came the family went to the Armory to pick up the car. As Louise drove slowly from the Armory the crowd cheered and shouted congratulations. The people assumed that this was the car that the Auto Show had raffled off. Paul, amused by their reaction, continuously waved and occasionally

tipped his hat. Louise was not amused. "It cost us a thousand dollars of our hard earned money", she lamented, "and everybody thinks we won it!"

That Model T opened a whole new world beyond the reaches of the trolley cars of Newark, the Hudson Manhattan Tubes, and the New York Subway System. It was the beginning of a new and exciting era for all of them, but particularly for Paul. It was now possible to fish from the Long Branch Pier, crab in the Shrewsbury River, and swim along the Jersey coast from Keansburg to Asbury Park. Lake Surprise in the Watchung Mountains, Lakes Budd and Hopatcong, the rolling farmland of Hackettstown, and the Delaware Water Gap were now within their reach.

There were no superhighways or turnpikes. Drivers followed the available roads — some black topped, others of cobblestone or just plain dirt — as they meandered in and out of towns, down country lanes, and over wooden planked bridges. Street signs were few and unsophisticated. One looked for landmarks. Directions would be "turn right at the church", "bear left at the Old Cherry Tree Farm", "watch for the Burma Shave sign on the right, then....", or "there will be a small waterfall on your right, go about a half-mile beyond and turn left at the garage".

Paul was the navigator. Once he memorized directions he never seemed to forget them. He sat up front with the driver, his back as straight as a ramrod, advising what landmark to look for and what to do when they reached it. When there were long intervals between landmarks and the family saw things of interest, they described them to him. He occasionally asked whether the object being described was on the right or left, or some other pertinent questions about it. On later trips along the same route it was not unusual for him to recall the discussion and ask additional questions.

Paul enjoyed the car. He never tired of riding and took great pleasure in fussing over it. Before each trip he dusted the car, and checked the flower vase for water and gasoline tank for fuel. There was no gas gauge — a dipstick was used as a gauge. To check the tank which was under the front car seat the seat had to be lifted up, the screwcap removed from

the tank, and the dipstick inserted into the tank. Paul's inability to read the markings on the dipstick did not deter him. He arranged to have the dipstick notched at the quarter, half, three-quarters, and full levels. Then, by feeling the portion of the stick wetted with gasoline and relating it to the notches on the stick, he was able to determine the amount of gasoline in the tank.

In later years he devised his own means for checking the water and oil levels and loved starting and revving the engine. It could be ninety degrees in the shade and Paul would still insist upon warming up the car. He wanted so badly to drive. He had overcome many obstacles in his lifetime but this was one he knew he could not — having to accept that fact hurt deeply.

Louise was all too often the verbal target of passing male drivers who did not take kindly to a woman driver, but it never fazed her. To her surprise one Sunday passengers of other cars were smiling and waving to her. The complete reversal of that which she was accustomed to bewildered but nevertheless pleased her.

Frieda and Dick Schmidt were joining the Meinerts on that Sunday drive. When they arrived at the Schmidts, Louise rushed into the house to get Frieda's reaction to her newly bobbed hair, the latest in hair styles, a style not yet generally accepted. Meanwhile, Paul took advantage of the opportunity to enlist Dick's help in devising a scheme to tease Louise about her hair. Dick was quick to oblige. With some available whitewash that could be easily removed, he painted on the outside of the driver's car door a rough picture of the head of a bobbed hair woman. Under the head he printed the caption, "The Bobbed-Hair Bandit", and added an arrow pointing up to the driver's seat. When Louise and Frieda came out, Dick with a great flourish opened the door and helped Louise up into the driver's seat in a manner that prevented her from seeing his handiwork. Shortly after they drove away, people in passing cars reacted to Dick's handiwork, and Paul and Dick took full advantage of the situation, commenting on how many people liked Louise's new hairstyle. Later on, when they stopped along the road,

Louise discovered Dick's artwork. While she appeared to be amused, she made sure that the car door was immediately wiped clean.

In the 1920s people reacted quickly and enjoyed simple things of that nature. The Burma Shave ditties strung out on signs along the byways inevitably started one or more of the car's passengers reading the ditties out loud. A ditty a few words per sign, with a sign every two hundred feet or so, was spread along the byways for a quarter of a mile or more.

When driving in a state other than their own, riders often shouted greetings as they passed other cars from their home state. Paul made it a game and got the whole family involved. When out of state, the family watched for Jersey cars and alerted Paul when one was about to pass. Then on the signal "Now!", he waved with gusto as he shouted, "Hi, Jersey!"

Spur-of-the-moment decisions to go for a ride were very common, particularly on hot sultry nights. On several of those unbearable nights they were sitting around the house in their night clothes when Louise or Paul suggested, "Let's take a ride and cool off". Consent was quick and no one stopped to change to street clothes. They grabbed a sweater or robe to guard against a possible late night chill in the air, headed for the car, drove to New York City, and rode up and down Riverside Drive. The fact that an accident or breakdown could have stranded them on the road in their night clothes never entered their minds. Louise and Paul had a childlike faith that the car would take them where they wanted to go and bring them home without incident.

Even being stranded overnight on the road did not seriously deter them. Louise, Paul, Janet, Mildred and Eddie were on their way home from the Jersey coast late one evening when the car's axle broke. Undaunted, they all slept in the car that night. The next morning Eddie picked up a new axle, removed and replaced the broken one, and the family drove home.

The first year Louise hesitated to drive too far. By the spring of 1923 long distance driving no longer fazed her and wanderlust had smitten her. Paul was very receptive to her

suggestion of a motor trip vacation. After much deliberation they decided to drive to Niagara Falls, a trip of about 375 miles of mostly small towns and country roads. Louise had second thoughts about it and sought out the advice of Harry Berkfeld, the car salesman who taught her to drive.

A trip to Niagara Falls appealed to him, and he proposed that their two families make the trip together, suggesting that it would be an ideal arrangement for Louise. She would feel more comfortable traveling with an experienced driver skilled in auto mechanics and knowing a second car was available to seek help in case of a breakdown. It was agreed: the two families would travel together. "But why stop at Niagara Falls?" Mr. Berkfeld suggested. "Canada is just across the river. It would be nice to see some of Canada and to taste some good beer and ale for a change."

If there had been any hesitation on Paul's part the thought of legal beer and ale dispelled it. It was agreed that after a stop at Niagara Falls, they would continue on to Toronto. The trip required a lot of planning. It would be a three-day drive to The Falls and one additional day to reach Toronto. There were no motels and many guest houses did not accept children or dogs. Mr. Berkfeld proposed that they utilize available campsites. Lean-to type tents were purchased. The tent looked like a normal tent that had been chopped in half. The large open end of the tent was placed snugly against the side of an automobile and tied to the car.

Paul's tent had ample room for three folding cots; one each for Paul, Louise, and Mildred. Janet, by far the smallest, was to sleep on the backseat of the car. Likewise, Louise Berkfeld would sleep in her car and her parents in their tent. It was agreed that breakfasts and suppers were to be prepared at the campsites, but at midday they would stop at restaurants for their main meal. Two canvas water pails, a Bunsen burner camp stove, metal pans, cups, and plates were purchased for the campsite meals.

Camping supplies, clothing, and other personal effects had to be limited to what could be packed in one luggage carrier plus any available space on or around the back seat of the car. Mr. Berkfeld planned the packing and unpacking

of both cars to achieve the best utilization of space consistent with ready access to items needed when setting up camp. Paul quickly learned the packing technique and became proficient at packing and unpacking his own car. Mr. Berkfeld continued to offer his help, but the desire to fully participate in the camping experience and the compulsion to be self-reliant were too strong. All such offers were tactfully rejected.

It was no different when it came to setting up the tent. Once shown how to do it, Paul insisted upon doing it himself. Initially, Mr. Berkfeld assisted him, but it was not long before Paul was on his own with Mr. Berkfeld unobtrusively checking to assure that the tent was firmly anchored. Occasionally he tightened a rope or reset a stake, but for the most part Paul did a good job. He was equally proficient at breaking camp. He had a set routine for taking down the tent, folding it, and packing all the gear. He seldom forgot an item. Both Louise and Mr. Berkfeld gave the campsite a final check before departing, and Paul passed inspection far more often than the rest of the group.

When it was time to break camp Paul was up early and eager to go. Mildred preferred to sleep late. One morning after several proddings to get up, Mildred's sleepy response of, "Yeah...yeah," exhausted Paul's patience. Quickly untying the tent ropes he let the tent collapse, smothering Mildred in canvas.

"Okay", he smugly announced, "see you when we get back".

Part of the fun of camping were the campsite evenings when they met people from different states. At one site they met a ventriloquist who entertained the other campers. Paul did not have any of his instruments with him, but the following day he stopped at a store and purchased some balloons. From that evening on he too often entertained at campsites along their route.

Requests for Paul to play favorite tunes became quite common on that trip. Mr. Berkfeld was the instigator, and Paul was never reluctant to oblige. It started on the second day of the trip when they stopped for lunch. Paul had the

unconscious habit of striking water glasses to hear their tones. When he did this Mr. Berkfeld became curious. On learning that the Musical Meinerts act featured the bottles and glasses, he asked how it was done.

Paul gathered eight glasses that were on the table and added and removed water from them until he achieved the tones he wanted. He then played a simple tune. Mr. Berkfeld encouraged him to continue on, and soon people at other tables began asking for tunes. Paul declined one of the early requests, explaining he did not have sufficient glasses to create the range of tones needed. Glasses were immediately forthcoming from other tables, and Paul expanded the range.

For all it was a delightful interlude in a long day's drive. There was no doubt that Mr. Berkfeld enjoyed himself. From that day on whenever they were in a restaurant and had the time to spare, he urged Paul to play the glasses. Each time that he did so, it was a repetition of that first day. The people were different but their reactions the same.

While they were enroute to the falls Mr. Berkfeld's car broke down, and they had to camp along the roadside for several days. While Mr. Berkfeld worked to repair his car Paul stood close by, occasionally handing him a tool and forever asking questions concerning the repair parts and procedures. When the job was finally finished, Paul announced with satisfaction, "Well, Harry, we got that done in short order!"

Mr. Berkfeld winked at Louise and replied, "We sure did, Paul".

They finally reached Niagara Falls and marveled at its majesty and beauty. Louise described it as best she could, but it was the mighty roar of the waters and the sounds in the Cave of the Winds that gave Paul his most vivid impressions. They sailed close to the falls on the Maid of the Mist. Later they donned raingear and journeyed into the Cave of the Winds, traveling down wet and moss-covered steps to a ledge of rock. Even the handrails were wet and often covered with moss. When they reached the ledge they were between the waterfall and a sheer rock wall.

While Louise never favored her crippled leg it was quite obvious that she was crippled. Janet was nine years old and about as responsible as any other child of that age. The cave attendants perceived no problem in their journeying down into the cave, but were reluctant to allow Paul to go because of his handicap. Paul was indignant.

"Look!" he demanded. "All my life I have taken care of myself and I can take care of myself down there! I'm going down!"

There was no precedent prohibiting a blind person, so the attendants reluctantly allowed him to go but not until he signed a release absolving the cave operators of all responsibility.

Paul made the trip through the Cave of the Winds without a mishap, intently listening, smelling, and touching, as the tour guide pointed out and described the sights and sounds of the cave. His curiosity was such that he had to whistle a few notes to test the acoustics in the area of the cave where the guide said a band once played. He enjoyed the tour immensely; more so, he enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing he had overcome another obstacle--an attempt to bar him because he was sightless.

After one final glimpse at the falls they continued on to Canada. After they crossed over from the land of prohibition to a land where liquor was legal, Paul had Louise read aloud all the different roadsigns for liquor, beer, and ale. After some five years of prohibition it was a novelty to find alcoholic beverages openly sold. He liked beer and ale, and sampled most of the available brands. (Perhaps that was one of the inducements that persuaded him to visit Canada on two more occasions.)

Their second trip was with the Glassens. Years ago Mrs. Glassen's parents had given Paul temporary shelter after he was ordered out of the house by his father. Because of that kindness a lifelong friendship developed between the Glassens and the Meinerts. When Paul and Louise related their experiences in Canada and talked of returning the next summer, it was inevitable that the two families would make the journey together — the Meinerts in their Ford and the

Glassens in their Scipps-Booth. This summer, however, the destination was Montreal.

As usual they took along Chetta, their miniature French poodle. She attracted the attention of some of the ferryboat crew members, while crossing the St. Lawrence River. When they came over to the car and began talking to Chetta in French, Paul was curious. It was an unfamiliar language. He tried communicating with them. They spoke no English, but one of them called over another crewman who spoke broken English. Paul asked what was being said to the dog, and he replied as best he could. Then Paul began to ask the meaning of French words he had overheard. His attempts to pronounce the words amused the men. His would-be interpreter realized what Paul was trying to do, and by the time they disembarked he had taught Paul a few simple phrases.

The third trip was just family. By then, Mildred was married and she and her husband traveled with them in one car. Eddie was an excellent driver and a good mechanic, so Louise had no qualms about making the trip without a backup car. Moreover, Eddie, always willing and anxious to be helpful, did much of the driving and campsite chores, making the trip more enjoyable for all.

In Montreal they stayed at a campsite on Rue Wellington. It was a skating rink in winter and camping grounds in the summer. One evening Eddie and Paul took the car and went looking for a tavern. Eddie had paid little or no attention to the route they traveled, and when they left the tavern later that night he was lost. They could not remember the name or the address of the campsite, only that it was a skating rink in the winter. When they found a policeman and told him of their plight, he promptly gave them directions to get there.

"Good gosh! That was quick!" Paul commented, "I guess there's only one skating rink in Montreal".

"Of course not", the officer disdainfully replied, "but there is only one banner on your car and it's advertising your campground".

When the vacation was over Paul and Eddie's thoughts turned to what had become a national pastime, sneaking liquor across the border. Eddie concluded it could be done if

the bottles were heavily wrapped in paper or cloth and stored in the backrest behind the back seat. Paul agreed. Paul bought the liquor, and Eddie did the packing.

When they reached the border the custom's officials, as was customary, asked if they were carrying any alcoholic beverages.

"Yep!" Paul promptly replied.

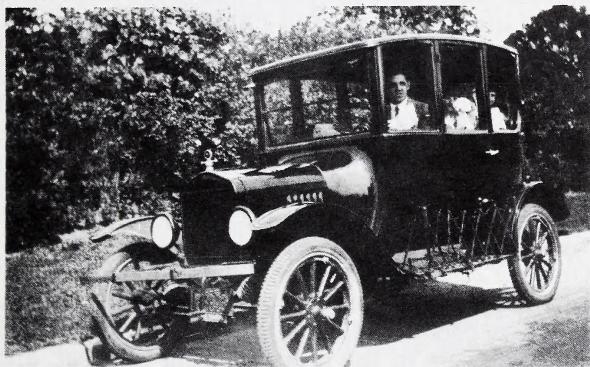
"Where is it, Sir"? asked the official.

"Right here", Paul said as he tapped his stomach, "and you're not getting one drop of it"!

The officials laughed, but it did not deter them from making their routine check. The family was instructed to get out of the car, after which the officials systematically struck the car seats and backrests with a heavy mallet. Eddie had done his job well — none of the bottles broke. Janet however almost gave it away as she bent over and looked under the car to see if any of the bottles were leaking. None of the officials noticed her, but Louise did and Janet heard about it as soon as they were safely away from the custom station.

The family never again returned to Canada. There was too much impishness in Paul. Once successful in getting liquor across the border, he would be surely tempted to try it again. Louise was very uneasy at the customhouse and had no intention of going through it again.

"It's things like that", she said, "that make you old before your time".



Chapter VIII

Catastrophe

By 1928 the winds of change were blowing strongly, but America was too busy to notice. It was engrossed in a love affair with the paper profits of the stock market and its new-found amusements — the automobile, radio, and motion pictures. Still naive, it was enjoying the good life, believing it to be everlasting.

The parlor was no longer the family's entertainment center. Movies provided amusement, the automobile made possible new forms of recreation, and the piano had lost its charm.

Piano sales had declined to such a degree by 1928 that Bamberger's closed their piano department and terminated Paul's employment. This was not a serious setback. The store divided its list of tuning customers between Paul and one other employee, and Paul's income as a free lance tuner coupled with that from bookings was more than adequate.

The good life continued, and Paul and Louise foresaw no need for concern. They had a good income and sizable savings in the bank. The bookings for New Year's Eve were lucrative, and they were confident that 1929 would be a banner year. In February, after Janet's mid-year graduation from grammar school, they hired a hall and gave her a gala graduation party. That summer they vacationed at the seashore, oblivious of the calamity that would suddenly befall not only them but all America.

On October 24, 1929, the great depression was triggered by the crash of the stock market; however, it was of little significance to them because they had not speculated in stocks. All their savings were in the bank earning interest, and they

assumed they were unaffected by the crash. It was not until they heard of a bank failure and of people rushing to withdraw their savings from other banks that they became concerned. They, too, decided to withdraw their savings before it was too late.

Early the next morning when Louise and Janet arrived at the bank, they found a long line of people queued up waiting for the bank to open. When the appointed time passed without the doors opening, the crowd became restless. It was not long before the crowd sensed that the bank had failed, and began to panic. When it was confirmed, some like Louise were stunned into silence, others were violently angry, but most became hysterical.

Louise and Janet returned home and told Paul that the bank had failed, that all their savings were lost. He had suspected as much from the depressing news on the radio. The loss of twenty-five years of accumulated savings was a devastating blow. Paul and Louise lapsed into an agonizing silence, each separately pondering the future. When the evening paper arrived its headlines screamed the news of the bank closing. Louise read aloud to Paul the depressing stories of personal tragedies caused by the crash and the subsequent banks closings, old people made destitute, families losing their homes, suicides, and businesses forced to lay off workers.

Supper that evening was gloomy and depressing. Janet, too young to comprehend, was the only one eating. Paul pushed away his plate and sat with a dazed expression on his face. A worried Louise was determined to bolster his spirits.

"Look, Paul, it's not as bad as it seems. We're far better off than a lot of people. We don't have any debts and we have our health".

Paul quietly pondered her remarks for a few moments and then replied, "You're right, Lou. All we lost was money. We will still have income from bookings and tuning. We'll get by".

His confidence reemerged and Louise was relieved. It temporarily buoyed up his spirits and gave him a false sense of

security. The income he anticipated however did not materialize. Bookings fell off drastically, and competition for the few bookings that were available resulted in very small fees. Piano tuning became a luxury that most homes could do without and those who still required it extended the periods between tunings.

The family's lifestyle suddenly and drastically changed. What little income they had was barely enough for the family to exist. There were no more parties, sumptuous meals, or automobile joyrides. Louise frugally used what little resources there were, knowing that there was no certainty as to when there would be another booking or piano tuning.

The only assured income were the meager salaries of Mildred and Janet. Mildred, who had separated from Eddie and returned to live with her parents shortly before the crash, was employed full time by a department store. Janet worked part-time after school and on Saturdays as a dancing school teacher.

Paul's pride and self-assurance were crushed by the knowledge that he was unable to provide for his family. It deeply troubled him that he was dependent upon his daughters. By the end of the year his depression had deepened. Christmas of 1929 had been in sharp contrast with previous years. Christmas Eve, gifts were few and very inexpensive, guests were limited to the very immediate family, and the supper while festive in appearance was exceedingly scant. Throughout the evening Paul tried hard to mask his true feelings, but his teary eyes were all too obvious.

What had become known as the hard times had arrived. The nation was in a deep depression, twelve million people were without jobs, and many families were barely eking out a living. The Meinerts were no exception. Just before the girls' paydays their total family resources were often as low as ten cents. Louise would not spend that last dime. It was symbolic — as long as she had it they were not destitute.

Paul was aware of the stress she was under and her concern that there were no savings to fall back on in the event of a dire emergency. He reasoned that if it was not possible to provide her with that security by his labors, it was his

responsibility to find other means of doing it. There was scant need for entertainers, so the only solution was to sell some of the instruments. Louise tried hard to dissuade him, but he was adamant. She was going to have her cash reserve. If his instruments could not provide it one way, they would provide it by another.

Paul had planned to sell some of his more commonplace instruments that could be easily replaced when times got better. He quickly found that they were valueless. Too many other people were trying to raise cash by selling their possessions. In desperation, he accepted an offer for what he prized the most — his glasses, bottles, chimes, and cathedral bells. The purchase price was ridiculously low but he was in no position to dicker — he needed the money.

By May, he was all but overcome by the events of the past seven months. The sale of the instruments signified to him the end of *The Musical Meinerts*, and this preyed on his mind as did his inability to provide for his family in the style they had been accustomed to. As his faith in himself was gradually destroyed he became increasingly nervous, moody, and subject to fainting spells, but he would not go to a doctor.

"We can't afford it", he argued.

"You're going to see a doctor!" Louise insisted. "If you don't go to him, I'll have him come to you. If he comes it's going to cost us more, so why don't you be sensible and go to him!"

The doctor's examination revealed that Paul was suffering from a nervous breakdown. The prescription was complete rest for at least three months, possibly longer.

"I can't do that", Paul argued, "I have a family to support!"

"If you don't", the doctor advised, "your family will not have you to support them". He then turned to Louise and instructed, "Make sure he rests. If there is any way for you to get away to the country for a few months, by all means do it. He needs a change of environment".

On the way home Paul grumbled, "There's no way possible for me to take three months off. We need the money".

Louise however found a way. They sold their *Hiltonia*

property, and there was sufficient money for expenses for at least the next six months. She was concerned nevertheless that she might not be able to restrain Paul for the three month period. When their good friends the Hurlses offered them the use of the guest cottage on their property at Rock Ridge Lake, Louise quickly accepted. Paul was reluctant to go for fear of missing out on any potential bookings or tunings, but Louise assured him it was not too far a drive and promised to drive him back to Newark for any job that developed.

They spent the entire summer at Rock Ridge Lake, and if any jobs did materialize Louise made sure that Paul was never aware of them. Meanwhile, some of Paul's political friends who had been trying to acquire the Newark School System's piano tuning contract for him, were successful in acquiring a contract for half of the schools in the system, effective in the fall. News of this buoyed up Paul's spirits and he began to relax. The enforced rest and the school contract provided the needed tonic. By Labor Day Paul was ready and anxious to get back to work.

Work however was still not that plentiful and Louise anxiously searched for activities to keep him occupied. Knowing that entertaining was almost as self-sustaining to Paul as the food he ate, Louise invited guests as often as possible. Of necessity, they entertained less often and the refreshments were scantier than in earlier days, but everybody enjoyed themselves immensely.

It helped to sustain them during those trying days. It brought the guests brief moments of relaxation when their problems were forgotten, and gave Paul an audience to entertain. In a way, they were now repaying Paul for all the earlier good times in the Meinert's parlor.

Neither guests nor his canaries were sufficient to fill up the long hours of inactivity, so Louise taught him to play solitaire. Simply stated, the object of the game is to consecutively build up each of the four card suits starting with the ace, then adding the two, then the three, and so on, until the king completes the run. It also involves several piles of cards which when face up must be in descending value and alter-

natingly a red and a black card. He determined the color by the shape of the suit.

When playing solitaire Paul held a card selected from the deck up to his eye and read it in the same manner as he did when playing casino. To read a card on top of a pile on the table however he had to bend over the table and get his eye close enough to the card to study it. It was difficult, but he managed.

Paul spent endless hours playing solitaire, usually when one of the family was around to witness the game. They made it easier for him by reading off the name of the cards on top of each pile. When they saw him play a card he had misread, they pointed it out and teased him about cheating. When no one in the room was paying attention to the game, he often purposely erred to attract their attention and get them involved.

Louise, concerned that the long periods of inactivity might bring on another breakdown, constantly searched for ways to keep Paul occupied. When she learned that the local motion picture houses provided the Commission for the Blind with free passes for blind persons and their guides, she applied for the passes. Paul agreed to the passes because of his concern for Louise. She needed a break from the drab and trying lifestyle that had been forced upon her. He swallowed his pride and accepted the passes so that she might regularly have one night on the town.

For the next two years they went downtown each week. They had dinner or just went for a bite to eat, depending upon their finances at the moment, and then went on to the movies. Paul usually picked up the gist of the story from the dialogue. Whenever possible, this was supplemented by Louise's whispered comments on what was transpiring on the screen. They always tried to sit far away from the rest of the audience so that Louise's comments did not create a disturbance. When this was not possible, Paul just sat and listened. When he could not follow the story, he gladly sat through the show knowing that Louise was enjoying herself.

In her search for ways to keep Paul occupied, Louise learned of the Association for the Blind' Circulating Library

of *talking* books — long playing records on which were transcribed the complete text of a book. The readers, leading actors and actresses of the day, made the stories come vividly to life.

When Louise first proposed the books, Paul rejected the idea. Louise, knowing that his pride had instinctively made him do it, was determined to change his mind.

"Paul, these are beautiful stories read by the best actors and actresses in the world!"

"Who needs them? I like the way you read stories".

"Forget it! I've done it for years. Now the *talking* books are available and I quit!"

"Why"

"You ask, why? You've heard my voice get weak and scratchy. You've caught me drowsing off. If there was no other way I'd do it, but now there is another way!"

"Okay, Lou, okay. Get the *talking* books".

Paul quickly discovered that Louise was right. *Talking* books became his favorite pastime and he spent many, many hours listening and relistening to the books, and particularly enjoying those read by Madeline Carroll. Periodically, when the updated list of available books arrived, Louise read the listing and Paul chose the books. It was a constant cycle of Louise mailing in his selections and the mailman delivering and picking up cases of records.

The year 1932 brought new hope for Paul. Roosevelt was running for president and proposing that Prohibition be repealed. Paul talked excitedly of the days when the saloons reopened and the restaurants again served liquor. There would soon be a great need for entertainers, and once again Meinert's parlor was a beehive of activity as he prepared for that day.

Chapter IX

Renaissance

On December 5, 1933, Prohibition was repealed. Taverns and clubs, readied in anticipation of the repeal of the Volsted Act, quickly opened and there was a demand for piano players who could sing. Once again, Paul put a blue bulb in the light socket. If that was what they wanted, he was ready to provide it.

The four preceding years had enforced a dramatic change in lifestyle upon the Meinerts. It had been the piano tunings that sustained them. Once again, at fifty-three years of age, he had the opportunity to do what he loved best, entertain. Times and circumstances were far different however; those large fees were no longer possible. Paul worked six nights a week for a salary plus tips. It was not large, but it did much to ease family conditions. Whatever tips he received he turned over to Louise. She urged him to keep some for pocket money, but he would have no part of it.

Monday, his free night, was reserved for Louise's night at the movies. Dining out prior to the movies, while never sumptuous, was a bit more lavish than before. Life became easier, not because of any great increase in income but by reason of Paul's working steadily. His nights were crowded with activity and his daytimes were occupied with piano tunings, rehearsing, and tending to his canaries.

In the 1930s Paul entertained at Smith's Long Bar in Newark, The Cave in Union, Duffy's on the Seventh Tee in Maplewood, Bertrand's Island Restaurant at Lake Hopatcong, and Guestle's Rendezvous in Elizabeth. Louise was his chauffeur, driving him to the job and returning each night to bring him home. Lake Hopatcong was the only exception. In

1936 he remained there for a one-week audition; and when he entertained there for the entire 1937 summer season, living quarters were provided for the family.

The mid-thirties was an eventful period for the Meinerts. Paul purchased and learned to play an accordion. Mildred and Eddie's attempted reconciliation, while unsuccessful, was of sufficient duration for Mildred to give birth to their only child Patsy-Ann. Mildred and the baby returned to live with Paul and Louise, and a few years later Eddie died.

When Paul entertained at Lake Hopatcong in 1937, the family's living quarters were in a long, narrow building behind the restaurant. There was a porch across the entire front of the building and its roof was supported by several somewhat flimsy columns.

Louise was in the habit of parking at the end of the porch. One morning when they were planning to go into town, Paul was out early to warm up the car. As he sat listening to the motor run, the urge to drive overwhelmed him and he slipped the car into gear. The car immediately collided with one of the porch columns and there was a resounding crack.

Paul turned off the motor and sheepishly waited for the inevitable. Louise, sure that an earthquake had occurred, came bounding out of the cottage door to discover the car and the porch column in a close embrace, and Paul sitting behind the wheel with an "Oh boy, what did I get into?" look on his face.

There was no serious damage — only one cracked porch column and a slightly sagging porch roof. Upon discovery that Paul was unhurt and the damage was minimal, Louise berated him unmercifully for his foolishness. While Paul accepted it knowing he deserved it, he secretly resented that constant reminder of his indiscretion — Louise's very articulate, "Don't you start that car!" each time he preceded her out to the car.

Through it all Paul's only defense was, "I didn't know the damn porch was that close!" As time went by he managed to say it with sufficient indignation to infer that it was the porch that caused the problem.

In 1935, when Mildred and the baby returned to live with

Paul and Louise, they moved to larger living quarters on Eighteenth Street, not too far from a park. Paul heard from neighbors that the park's bluejays could be coaxed to a window. All one had to do was to place some peanuts on the windowsill and then tap on the windowpane with another peanut. He had to try it. Louise watched as Paul tapped on the window. She alerted him when the jays approached, and described in whispers what she saw.

He soon tired of this because the descriptions were always basically the same. He had a better idea. Perhaps the jays would come into the room for the peanuts. If they did and he was in bed completely covered by a blanket on which the peanuts were placed, his body could feel the birds moving around.

Surprisingly, it worked. Often, when the weather permitted, Paul was under the blanket feeding his jays. Louise kept the bedroom door slightly ajar so that she could observe. What interested her most was Paul's patience, his ability to remain unmovable for long periods of time.

That patience however was short lived whenever he decided his daughters were talking too much. "If you don't stop talking and start listening", he often admonished them, "you'll die with only the knowledge you were born with!"

Paul listened, and learned about people and about the world around him. He never talked about himself or his past, preferring to learn by asking questions or encouraging others to talk of themselves. By the tones and inflections of their voices he detected their moods and their sincerity, and perceived them by what they said and how they said it.

His daughters were adults now, and it irritated him whenever their conversations suggested that they had judged people by what they saw rather than by what they heard. Clothes and general appearance of an individual, which could not cloud his judgment, provided the girls with their first and often unfavorable impressions. In frustration, after hearing them cattily discussing the hairdo and attire of an acquaintance, Paul berated them, "When are you going to learn? Shut your eyes and see! Don't judge people by their appearances — listen to what they say. That is the only way

to really see a person”.

Paul's perception of people was based on what he heard, but colors were based on what he had been taught. Red was strong, gay, vibrant. Black was hard, glum, and depressing.

Upon hearing Janet had purchased a black dress, he asked, “Why would you ever want to wear black?”

“Basic black is chic, Poppa. You can do so much with it.”

“But why”, Paul questioned, “do you want to look like the devil?” Sensing she was nonplused by his question, he added, “Well, the devil is black, isn't he?”

“No, Poppa, he is red, your favorite color”.

Paul was dumbfounded. He could not conceive of such an evil character being bright and vibrant. Red to him symbolized good things. The American Flag was red, white and blue; and the colors of Christmas were red and green.

Despite the frugality imposed upon him by the times, Paul always looked forward to Christmas. During the late 1930s conditions slowly improved, and Patsy-Ann rekindled the magic of Christmas. Patsy's wide-eyed acceptance of Santa enabled her grandfather to once again amuse a small child, and himself, with his unique tales about Santa Claus.

In 1940 Janet was married, and Paul celebrated his sixtieth birthday. He was still entertaining at Guestle's Rendezvous and would continue to do so for the next sixteen years. The decade of the 1940s brought with it further changes. Janet provided Paul and Louise with two additional granddaughters: Judy in 1941 and Joyce in 1944. Mildred remarried in 1948, and for the first time in forty-eight years Paul and Louise were living alone. Late in the decade Paul accepted a job at Baker Piano Company and reverted to his old habits. For the next eight years he tuned pianos during the day and entertained at night, getting by on about five hours sleep a night.

World War II, gasoline rationing, and food shortages dominated the first half of the decade, but Louise managed to get sufficient gas rations to chauffeur Paul to and from the Rendezvous in Elizabeth. Janet lived in the Bronx. When she visited her parents she took the subway downtown, the Hudson and Manhattan Tubes to Newark, and the bus to

their home. Knowing this was difficult with two small children, Paul always arranged to meet them at the Hudson and Manhattan Station in New York and escort them to his house. To be more precise, he escorted the baby. He constantly gibbered to her, amusing her all the way to his home. It was hard to tell who was the most amused, Paul, the baby, or their fellow passengers.

In 1943 Louise convinced Paul to buy a corset. He had put on weight, especially around his mid-section. Louise had spotted an ad for men's corsets that in tantalizing superlatives described how it would enhance one's appearance. The corset was purchased and worn nightly. When no one at the club commented on his new look, Paul became discouraged. Whenever he expressed his doubts, Louise and Mildred's reassurances were too glib and he was suspicious. Knowing Janet would be quick to observe any change in his appearance, he begrudgingly announced he would continue to wear it until her next visit.

When she arrived, the usual grandparent fuss over the grandchildren prevailed, and Louise forgot to mention the corset. After things settled down Paul began to pace up and down. At first Janet did not notice him, but when he started focusing his good eye on her she had a feeling he had a problem to discuss but couldn't bring himself around to do it. Uneasily she asked, "Is something bothering you Poppa?"

"Nope", he replied. "Don't you notice anything different about me?"

"No". Then after a long pause she continued, "Only that you're pacing up and down. Am I supposed to notice something?"

"Are you sure?"

Louise was winking at Janet, but Janet didn't know what was expected of her, so she said, "No — you look good".

"Hah", he responded, "I always look good".

"Well, what is it?"

With that the damage was done. Paul turned to Louise and blurted out, "The hell with this thing!" Turning back to Janet he continued, "I've been wearing this damn corset, my shoulders are pulled back, my stomach's pulled in, and you

never noticed it. They're giving me the business — telling me how great I look!"

"Well, you do", she interrupted.

"Nope, it's too late now. You shot it!" he retorted as he strode out of the kitchen. A few minutes later he reappeared holding up the corset for Janet to see. "This is the damn thing I've been wearing", he said in disgust. "I've been waiting for you to tell me how great I look, but it's too late now no matter what you say". His decision was final. He never wore the corset again.

In the mid-1940s when cornea transplants became feasible, Louise urged Paul to see a doctor. While he had been bitterly disappointed many times over the years and had vowed never again to have his eyes examined, he nevertheless did so to please Louise.

Paul had no reason to believe that this examination would be any different from those in the past. The doctor however was very optimistic after the preliminary examination. He advised Paul that there was a good chance that a transplant could enable him to see. Paul was exuberant. He returned home excitedly anticipating the day when he would see Louise and the girls for the first time. He talked incessantly about the day and teased Louise and the girls about what he would do if they were not as pretty as he expected them to be.

On the initial visit, Paul mentioned to the doctor that his name was familiar and asked if by chance he was the young doctor who assisted at an eye operation Paul underwent years ago. The doctor did not recall that operation, but later when he checked his records he discovered he had assisted at that operation. On Paul's next visit to his office the doctor advised Paul that he had gotten hold of and reviewed the records of the operation.

"Look", he brusquely added, "there is nothing I can do for you. I am a doctor — not a magician!"

Paul was stunned by the doctor's brutal announcement. He had been led to believe in the impossible, and now suddenly all his hopes were destroyed. It was a crushing blow. In time the hurt and anger that swelled within him eased, but he never again would consider or even discuss the possi-

bilities of an eye examination.

He buried himself in his work and tried to forget. A few weeks later on Saint Patrick's Day he was at the piano singing Irish songs when Jim Brady came into the Rendezvous. Jim, who liked to be known as Diamond Jim Brady, spent money freely to create that impression.

Upon hearing Paul's Irish brogue, Diamond Jim couldn't resist teasing Guestle, "So, you finally got smart and hired an Irish entertainer!"

"No", Guestle replied, "he's German".

Brady was not convinced; the brogue was too natural. He sauntered over to the piano and greeted Paul. "Hi, Guestle says you're not Irish, you're German".

"Sure and you have to fool these Dutchmen to get a job here", Paul replied in his best Irish brogue.

Firmly satisfied that Paul was Irish and had hoodwinked Guestle to get the job, Diamond Jim lived up to his image. He slipped Paul a twenty-dollar tip. When Paul returned home that night and Louise told him it was a twenty, he was shocked. He thought it was a dollar. What he had said he said in fun with no idea that Diamond Jim had taken him seriously. Not wanting to offend him, Paul decided to keep up the pretense.

When Diamond Jim next visited the Rendezvous, Paul recognized his voice and began to sing Irish songs. Once again, Diamond Jim showed his appreciation with a ten-dollar tip. From that night on, Paul never failed to react when he heard Diamond Jim's voice. He was quick to admit however the motivation was the size of the tip — not the desire to continue the hoax that he was Irish.

The latter 40s were for the most part uneventful. Paul worked nightly at the Rendezvous and at Baker's Piano Company during the day. Janet's family moved to Westfield, a thirty minute drive from her parent's home. Family get-togethers became more frequent, and the center for holiday festivities gradually shifted to Janet's house.

Paul and his accordion became the main attraction at the children's birthday parties. Quite often, when invited, the first question asked by their friends was, "Will your grand-

father be there?" Paul's special talents and his willingness to cater to the children's interests, funny songs, sing-a-longs, musical chairs, and comic recitations, made the parties unique.

In 1950 Paul celebrated his seventieth birthday, still enjoying good health and working steadily at the club and the piano company. In 1954, when Paul and Louise celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, both were as active as they were in the 1940s — Paul working his two jobs, Louise driving him to and from the club each night, and using what free time they had to go places and do the things they enjoyed.

They were Janet's houseguests while her family was vacationing at Ship Bottom in 1951. Janet's husband and two of his buddies arranged a fishing party for Paul. On the night before, the four men talked fishing at a local tavern until one in the morning. Four hours later they were up and on their way fishing. By 10:00 a.m. it was hot and their open boat provided no shelter. The three younger men, exhausted by the sun and lack of sleep periodically dozed, but not Paul. There were fish to be caught and sandwiches and beer to be consumed. Paul caught more fish than any of his fishing partners, and when they returned home he teased the "younger fellows" unmercifully about falling asleep on the job.

On one occasion in 1951 when someone offered to drive Paul home from the Rendezvous, Louise went to bed early assuming Paul would awaken her when he got in. He didn't.

The next morning Louise remarked, "That's terrible! You should have called me and I would have fixed you something to eat".

"Oh, that's all right, I managed for myself. I found some cold chopped beef in the refrigerator".

"Chopped beef? What chopped beef?" she asked. "I don't recall any chopped beef".

"There sure was", he assured her. "In fact the empty bowl is in the sink".

Louise checked the sink. "Paul", she said in amazement, "that wasn't chopped beef — canned dog food was in that

bowl!"

"Dog food?" he asked in disbelief. Then after a moment of silence he continued, "Gee that dog eats all right. It was good!"

In his seventies Paul could and did eat everything without fear of after effects, even the dog food. He ate with all the vigor and enthusiasm of a young man. So much so, that one of Janet's guests, her husband's Uncle Joe, said one of the pleasures of Christmas dinner at Janet's was watching Paul eat. Joe was five years younger than Paul. Like most older people, he had to be careful of what and how much he ate, and he yearned to once again eat as Paul did.

Louise prepared Paul's lunches and made sure they were ample and tantalizingly delicious. Sid, Paul's co-worker at the Piano Company, was his luncheon companion. Together they talked of many things. Sid, not a young man, was unmarried and lived with his mother. He was a skilled worker, a pleasant, interesting man whom Paul respected. His name was often injected into the conversations at the family dinner table, and Louise sensing that there was a strong bond of friendship between the two men, suggested that Paul invite Sid to Sunday dinner. Paul welcomed the suggestion, and the invitation was extended the next morning.

When Sid arrived Louise went to the door to greet him. When she opened the door and saw Sid, a black man, she was shocked. Social intermingling of the races was not common, and like most people Louise was prejudiced. She nevertheless invited him in and managed to hide her dismay. The dinner, a pleasant, uneventful affair, was followed by an enjoyable afternoon in the parlor. As usual, it was a mixture of music and conversation. After Sid departed Paul turned to Louise and asked, "Isn't he a great guy?"

"Yes," Louise replied, "but did you know he is black?"

"Hey? How about that?" Paul chuckled for a moment and then went on to talk about what an enjoyable day it had been.

Most of their friends had moved to Florida or had died. What little entertaining they did was family entertaining.

More often, it was family get-togethers at Mildred or Janet's home.

On June 22, 1954, there was a gala dinner party celebrating their Golden Wedding Anniversary. Afterwards, Paul took a two-week vacation leave, and they journeyed South by bus for a reunion in Florida with their old friends the Glassens.

Then in 1956 when Paul was seventy-five years old, Louise broke her hip and their lifestyle suddenly and drastically changed. Louise was no longer able to drive a car, and because Paul had no other means of getting to and from the club he had to take what turned out to be a permanent leave of absence.

He continued working daily at the piano company. It had been his practice to commute to and from the job by bus, so Louise's accident did not require any sudden change in his commuting pattern. Janet and her husband tried to have him stay with them, but it was too far and too new a commuting pattern for him to attempt and he was not about to be out of work when he had a wife in the hospital.

He made his own breakfasts and suppers, and at noontime had his main meal downtown. Mildred, who lived not too far away, was also working but managed to shop for Paul and to tidy up the house. Other than that he was strictly on his own for the first time in fifty-two years.

Louise was hospitalized most of the summer. When she was released, Janet brought her out to her house for a period of rehabilitation. Throughout her youth Louise had walked with the aid of crutches. In her adult years she had managed without them, but now once again she had to revert to them. She wanted to walk, but the severe pain she had suffered and the fear of falling and rebreaking her hip were foremost in her mind.

Paul had been aware of her fear long before she left the hospital. Work, lack of transportation, and hospital regulations kept him from being constantly by her side while she was hospitalized. At Janet's home, work was the only deterrent and that was of far less importance than comforting Louise. Paul took a leave of absence and remained at her side. Along with the rest of the family, he constantly strove

to give her the confidence to walk again. She never again was fully confident of her footing but did summon up the courage to walk with crutches.

The family's efforts helped, but the real stimulus was her awareness of Paul's desire to get back to work and the knowledge that he would not do it until she was able to return home with him. For Paul's sake she overcame her fear and forced herself to walk.

The rehabilitation period lasted about six weeks, after which Louise and Paul returned home to a far different lifestyle. Paul went back to his day job at the piano company, but Louise's inability to drive prevented his return to the club. His nights and weekends were free, but they were now dependent upon others for mobility. Mildred did their shopping and spent her day off each week doing whatever heavy housekeeping that was necessary. As most of their old friends were dead, incapacitated, or living too far away, they seldom had any company other than family.

For almost three years this quiet existence continued. Initially, Paul practiced regularly, hoping one day Louise would drive again and he would be entertaining once more. Gradually, as the realization began to force itself upon him that this would never be, his determination to practice diminished but never ceased.

When Louise broke her hip in 1956, Paul at age seventy-five was still a young man full of vitality, energy, and interests. Her accident abruptly ended his fifty-eight year career as an entertainer, which was akin to taking away his life's substance. Worried about Louise and generally confined to the house with a sudden abundance of free time, he rapidly began to show his age. His spirit lost its buoyancy, and perhaps this more than anything else brought on the stroke in 1959 that made him a very old man at seventy-eight.

The strut which had become his trademark became a painstakingly slow shuffle. His speech was slightly slurred, his face noticeably distorted, and his singing voice gone. He still practiced occasionally, and it was a sad thing to witness. The dexterity had left his hands. Too often he struck the wrong note and too often his voice cracked as he tried to

sing, but he persevered nonetheless. From the occasional tear seen running down his cheek, it was obvious that he was aware of it but refused to accept it.

For the next five years Paul kept insisting he was ready to return to work, and Louise kept making excuses. No one had the heart to tell him he could never work again. His mind was reasonably alert, but it was not as sharp and as quick as it had been. He was willing to sit quietly and contentedly for long periods of time, no longer displaying that everlasting curiosity or that urge to be at the center of things. Paul had finally grown old.

Late in October of 1964 he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, lapsed into a coma, died on November 4, and was inadvertently buried in the wrong grave. The following day, when the cemetery officials notified the family of the error and advised that Paul's remains had been exhumed and reburied in the proper grave, Paul's youngest granddaughter observed, "Now, isn't that just like Pop-Pop! He had to take a second curtain call!"

Appendix I

THE MUSICAL MEINERTS

Outline for the big act in the early 1920s

Paul Meinert

Piano Solo — "Carrisima"

Singing — "Morning Will Come"

"Me No Speaka Good English"

Janet Meinert

Singing and Dancing — "Louisville Lou"

"Oh, Gee! Oh, Gosh!"

"Apple Tree Duet" by Paul and Janet Meinert

Paul Meinert

Saxophone Solo — "Love Sends a Little Gift of Roses"

"When You Look in the Heart of a Rose"

Paul Meinert

One-String Horn — "Dearest"

"Crinoline Days"

Paul Meinert

One-String Violin — "Evening Star"

"Smilin' Through"

Paul Meinert

Saw — "Crumbs of Happiness"

"Just a Girl That Men Forget"

Paul Meinert

Violin Solo — "Spirit of Independence"

Janet Meinert

Toe Dancing — "Sylvia Ballet"

Singing and Dancing — "Scandinavia"

Paul Meinert

Monologues — "Snyder's Grocery Store"
"McCarty"

Mimic — Imitations, etc.

Janet Meinert

Singing and Dancing — "Doll Dance"
"You Tell'm I Stutter"
"Ding Toes"
"Ha, Ha, Ha"

Paul and Louise Meinert

Bottles — "Gang of Mine"
"Linger Awhile"
"Moonlight"

Glasses — "Wonderful One"
"Mother McCree"

Chimes — "Sunshine of Your Smile"
"Sweet and Low"

Appendix II

The Musical Meinerts

*Affairs at Which the Big or Little Act Performed
(list limited to shows for which programs still exist)*

- 1904 — Auxiliary of St. Johns Chapel — Grand High Class
Vaudeville — Columbus Theater.
- 1906 — Third Grand Annual Concert and Reception — Given
by the Blind — Germania Hall.
- 1910 — The Republic Club — Washington's Birthday
Entertainment.
- 1911 — Concert — Men's Brotherhood of Irvington M.E.
Church.
- 1911 — Fred Wagner Camel Club — Grand Annual Reception
and Anniversary — Doelger's Hall, Newark, N.J.
- 1913 — "Dutch Arms" of Netherwood Reformed Church —
Ladies Night Entertainment.
- 1914 — St. King Casimer Church — Vaudeville Show —
Parish Hall (printed in Polish language).
- 1916 — Benefit for Hungry People of Poland — Nanticoke,
PA.
- 1918 — Eureka Lodge #123 — I.O.O.F. — Anniversary Enter-
tainment — Newark, N.J.
- 1919 — Friendship B.A.C. — 44th Anniversary and Dance —
Dubois Colosseum — Newark, N.J.

- 1920 — St. Mary's Church — A Night of Vaudeville — School Hall.
- 1920 — Entertainment — Auspices of Church Choir in Kilburn Church.
- 1926 — Bowling Club Dinner — Rahway Lodge #1075 — B.P.O.E.
- 1926 — Entertainment — Auspices of the Open Door Class of Brick Presbyterian Church.
- 1926 — Fifteenth Annual Banquet — Washington H.S. Alumni Association — Washington N.J.
- 1926 — Monster Smoker — St. Mary's Council — #2346 Knights of Columbus — Nutley, N.J.
- 1926 — Central Avenue Presbyterian Church — Entertainment and Social.
- 1926 — Belmont Benevolent Association — Smoker — Laurel Garden.
- 1927 — Trades Union Antituberculosis Association of Newark and Vicinity — 16th Annual Entertainment and Dance — The Labor Lyceum.
- 1927 — Thirty-Second Entertainment and Dance — Twilight Council #7 — Jr. O.U.A.M. — Scotch Plains, N.J.
- 1927 — Fifty-Seventh Anniversary Dance and Show — Henry Clay Lodge #45, Knights of Pythias — Newark, N.J.
- 1929 — Vaudeville Show — Post #90 American Legion — Mamaroneck, N.Y.

1929 — First Anniversary Dinner — O. Pals Athletic Club,
Hackensack, N.J.

1930 — Thiel's Big Show and Dance — Liederkrantz Hall —
Elizabeth, N.J.

Appendix III

Musical Instruments and Novelties Played by Musical Meinerts

Instruments

Piano
Organ
Xylophone
Accordion
Harmonica
Chimes (Metal and Bamboo)
Violin
Cello
Guitar
Saxophone
Flute
Drums

Novelties

Cathedral Bells
Wine Glasses
Bottles
Musical Saw
Kazoo
Flexatone
Spoons
Rubber Hose
Balloon
One-String Violin
One-String Horn
One-String Coconut Shell

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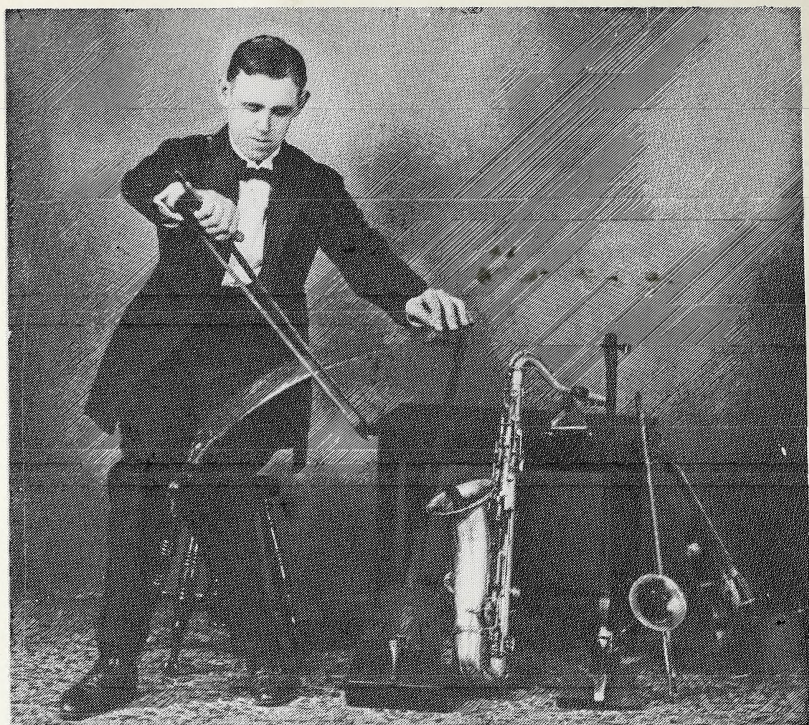
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Commerce as Assistant Director of the Container and Pack-
 aging Division; and, was a member of the National Defense
 Executive Reserve from 1960 to 1974. Mason opted for early
 retirement in 1976 to write Rx: APPLAUSE, the biography
 of Sylvester Meinert. He married Sylvester's daughter,
 Janet, in 1940. They have two daughters, Mrs. Judith De-
 Chellis of Clinton, New Jersey and Mrs. Joyce Thomas of
 Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.



Rx: Applause — The Biography Of A Blind Performer

by Mason Turner

Sylvester was a cocky little boy, determined and anxious to prove that he was no different from his brother or sisters. After he lost his sight in 1881, at six months of age, he suffered from the cold indifference of his mother and from the constant discouragements of his father. Because of his inner instincts and motivation, by the time he was twenty four years old however, he had already become a well established entertainer, and his beloved Lou was his bride.

From 1904 up to the time of the Great Depression, he spanned twenty five fun-filled years of unseemingly and boundless success. It was the era when vaudeville flourished, and Sylvester flourished with it.

With the Depression, his career came to an abrupt end, his life's savings completely wiped out. With his family to support and little work available, he faced the biggest challenge of his life — restoring his once unshakable faith in himself.

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